



INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(51) International Patent Classification 7 : G06F 17/60	A1	(11) International Publication Number: WO 00/39720 (43) International Publication Date: 6 July 2000 (06.07.00)
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 48%;"> <p>(21) International Application Number: PCT/US99/19955</p> <p>(22) International Filing Date: 31 August 1999 (31.08.99)</p> <p>(30) Priority Data: 09/282,747 5 October 1998 (05.10.98) US</p> <p>(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): WALKER DIGITAL, LLC [US/US]; Five High Ridge Park, Stamford, CT 06905-1326 (US).</p> <p>(72) Inventors; and (75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): WALKER, Jay, S. [US/US]; 124 Spectacle Lane, Ridgefield, CT 06877 (US). TEDESCO, Daniel, E. [US/US]; Apartment 6, 192 Park Street, New Canaan, CT 06840 (US). TULLEY, Stephen, C. [US/US]; 15 River Place, Stamford, CT 06907 (US). PACKES, John, M., Jr. [US/US]; 21 Frankford Street, Hawthorne, NY 10532-1950 (US). O'SHEA, Deirdre [US/US]; Apartment 2A, 10 Manhattan Avenue, New York, NY 10025 (US). BEMER, Keith [US/US]; Apartment 34B, 225 East 95th Street, New York, NY 10128 (US). JORASCH, James, A. [US/US]; Apartment 5G, 25 Forest Street, Stamford, CT 06901 (US). ALDERUCCI, Dean, P. [US/US]; 19-8 Prospect Ridge Road, Ridgefield, CT 06877 (US).</p> </div> <div style="width: 48%;"> <p>(74) Agents: ALDERUCCI, Dean et al.; Walker Digital Corporation, Intellectual Property Dept., Five High Ridge Park, Stamford, CT 06905-1326 (US).</p> <p>(81) Designated States: AE, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, CA, CH, CN, CU, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KB, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, NO, NZ, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, UA, UG, US, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW, ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, SD, SL, SZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).</p> </div> </div>		
<p>(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS BASED ON A CUSTOMER ACTIVITY</p> <p>(57) Abstract</p> <p>In accordance with the present invention, a controller receives information relating to customer activity with a first vendor, typically via a Web page that a customer accesses. The controller further receives an indication of items the customer desires to purchase, the items having an associated total price. The controller determines, based on any of various criteria, whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity. For example, a customer that places certain items in his virtual shopping cart may receive such an offer. The offer for a subsidy is from a second vendor (a subsidizing vendor), and may define, for example, a reduction in the price charged for the item and an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy. For example, the customer may be obliged to sign up for a credit card or telephone service provided by the subsidizing vendor. An indication of the offer for the subsidy is provided to the customer, e.g., via a text or graphical display on the Web page. The customer responds via known user interface techniques and, if he accepts the offer, he is charged a second price for the items. The second price is less than the total price, and may even be zero. Thus the customer may get his desired items for free in exchange for fulfilling the obligation with the subsidizing vendor.</p>		
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: flex-end;"> <div style="width: 65%;"> <pre> graph TD 140[SUBSIDIZING VENDOR SERVER 140] --> 110[CONTROLLER 110] 110 --> 120[VENDOR SERVER 120] 120 --> 130[CUSTOMER TERMINAL 130] </pre> </div> <div style="width: 30%; text-align: right;"> <p>100</p> </div> </div>		

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**METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING
CROSS-BENEFITS BASED ON A CUSTOMER ACTIVITY**

The present application is a continuation-in-part application of co-
5 pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND
APPARATUS FOR FACILITATING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH
PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS DURING A TRANSACTION", filed on December
23, 1998; and is a continuation-in-part application of co-pending U.S. Patent
Application No. 09/274,281 (attorney Docket No. 99-006) entitled "METHOD AND
10 APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS VIA A CENTRAL
AUTHORITY", filed on March 22, 1999; which is a continuation-in-part application of
co-pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND
APPARATUS FOR FACILITATING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH
PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS DURING A TRANSACTION", filed on December
15 23, 1998; and is a continuation-in-part application of co-pending U.S. Patent
Application No. 09/116,367 entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
PROVIDING A DISCOUNT TO A CUSTOMER THAT PARTICIPATES IN
TRANSACTIONS AT A PLURALITY OF MERCHANTS", filed on October 5, 1998;
the entirety of each incorporated by reference herein as part of the present disclosure.

20

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and apparatus for facilitating
commerce.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

There is a great deal of competition among vendors to attract and retain customers. Even when a customer has browsed a vendor's inventory, he will not make a purchase if an item's price is greater than the amount the customer is willing to pay.

5 One way to increase customer willingness to purchase is to provide discounts on items purchased. Unfortunately, vendors must use discounts sparingly, since reducing purchase prices likewise reduces margins and the reduced margins may not be offset by increased sales volume.

A vendor may also offer promotions to provide an incentive for
10 customers to make purchases. For example, a vendor may offer a "buy one get one free" promotion whereby a purchase of an item yields the benefit of an additional item at no cost. Similarly, a vendor may provide a discount on a purchase in exchange for signing up for a credit card account provided by the vendor.

Promotions may also be provided among two or more vendors. For
15 example, a first vendor may advertise that if a particular product is purchased, another product may be purchased from or given away by a second vendor.

A parent application of the present application, U.S. Patent Application
No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR FACILITATING
ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS
20 DURING A TRANSACTION", filed on December 23, 1998, discloses a method and apparatus that permits a customer that is purchasing items from a first vendor to receive

a benefit (e.g. a credit for the price of the items) from a second vendor. The present application provides further embodiments of this novel and beneficial invention.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 It is an object of the present invention to provide a method and apparatus for facilitating commerce.

 In accordance with the present invention, a controller receives information relating to customer activity with a first vendor, typically via a Web page that a customer accesses. The controller further receives an indication of items (goods
10 and/or services) the customer desires to purchase, the items having an associated total price. The controller determines, based on any of various criteria, whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity. For example, a customer who places certain items in his virtual "shopping cart" may receive such an offer. The offer for a subsidy is from a second vendor (a subsidizing
15 vendor), and may define, for example, a reduction in the price charged for the item and an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy. For example, the customer may be obliged to sign up for a credit card or telephone service provided by the subsidizing vendor.

 An indication of the offer for the subsidy is provided to the customer,
20 e.g., via a text or graphical display on the Web page. The customer responds via known user interface techniques and, if he accepts the offer, he is charged a second price for the items. The second price is less than the total price, and may even be zero.

Thus the customer may get his desired items for free in exchange for fulfilling the obligation with the subsidizing vendor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5 FIG. 1A is a schematic illustration of an embodiment of an apparatus for facilitating commerce in accordance with the present invention.

 FIG. 1B is a schematic illustration of another embodiment of an apparatus for facilitating commerce in accordance with the present invention.

 FIG. 2 is a schematic illustration of a controller of the apparatus of FIG.

10 1.

 FIG. 3 is a schematic illustration of a vendor server of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

 FIG. 4 is a representation of a customer database of the controller of FIG. 2.

15 FIG. 5 is a representation of a vendor database of the controller of FIG.

2.

 FIG. 6 is a representation of a transaction database of the controller of FIG. 2.

 FIG. 7 is a representation of a subsidizer database of the controller of FIG. 2.

20 FIG. 2.

 FIG. 8 is a representation of an offer rules database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 9 is a representation of an offers database of the controller of FIG.

2.

FIG. 10 is a representation of a record of an offer summary database of the controller of FIG. 2.

5 FIG. 11 is a representation of a record of another embodiment of the offer summary database.

FIG. 12 is a schematic illustration of an item database of the vendor server of FIG. 3.

10 FIG. 13 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit.

FIG. 14 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit using offer rules.

15 FIGS. 15A and 15B are a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method for providing an offer which may be accepted by fulfilling an obligation associated with the offer.

FIG. 16 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method for determining whether customers have fulfilled their obligations associated with an offer for a benefit.

20 FIG. 17 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit after a customer has made a purchase from a vendor.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Applicants have recognized that the acquisition budgets of various service providers may be advantageously used to facilitate commerce. A customer that purchases items from a first vendor may be paid, directly or indirectly, by a second vendor, so that the customer pays a reduced price, perhaps nothing at all, for his desired items. In exchange, the customer participates or agrees to participate in a transaction with the second vendor. For example, the customer may be required to sign up for a service that is provided by the second vendor. Since many service providers are willing to pay significant amounts of money (e.g. often \$50 to \$200) to acquire a new customer, the ability to acquire a customer by essentially "intervening" in a sale between others can benefit all parties involved. In short, the second vendor provides a subsidy to the customer. The customer is benefited by the reduced price of his items, the first vendor is benefited by the increased sales and customer satisfaction that such an arrangement would bring, and the second vendor is benefited by the additional transaction, particularly the acquisition of a new customer in one embodiment.

In addition, applicants have also recognized that various types of customer activities may be used to indicate, among other things, whether the customer is likely to accept an offer for a benefit from a subsidizing vendor. For example, when a customer begins to interact with a first vendor (e.g. via the first vendor's Web site), various types of customer activity may be used to indicate whether the customer is willing to transact with the first vendor. Similarly, various types of customer activity may be used to indicate whether the customer is willing to transact with a subsidizing

vendor. Detection of such customer activity can assist in identifying, e.g., which customers should be given offers for subsidies, and when.

Referring to FIG. 1A, an apparatus 100 includes a controller 110 that is in communication with a vendor server 120. The controller 110 and the vendor server
5 120 may comprise computers, such as those based on an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that are adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Any number of vendor servers may be in communication with the controller 110. Those skilled in the art will understand that devices in communication with each other need not be continually transmitting to each other. On the contrary,
10 such devices need only transmit to each other as necessary, and may actually refrain from exchanging data most of the time. For example, a device in communication with another device via the Internet may not transmit data to the other device for weeks at a time.

The vendor server 120 may be a "Web server" of a vendor (e.g. a retail
15 seller). A vendor server could then generate Web pages (documents on the World Wide Web that typically include an HTML file and associated graphics and script files) that may be accessed via the World Wide Web and allow purchases from the vendor to be made in a manner known in the art. A Web site consists of several such Web pages and associated databases served up by an HTTP server (e.g. the vendor server 120) on
20 the World Wide Web. Alternatively, the vendor server 120 may be a computer involved in operating a physical store. Such a computer, for example a point of sale

(POS) server, would perform such tasks as inventory management and transaction processing for the store.

The controller 110 is also in communication with a subsidizing vendor server 140. The subsidizing vendor server 140 may comprise a computer, such as those
5 based on an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that is adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Any number of subsidizing vendor servers may be in communication with the controller 110.

The subsidizing vendor server 140 may be a "Web server" of a vendor. The subsidizing vendor server 140 could then generate a Web page that may be
10 accessed via the World Wide Web and allow transactions with the subsidizing vendor in a manner known in the art. Alternatively, the subsidizing vendor server 140 may be a computer involved in operating a physical store. Such a computer would perform such tasks as inventory management and transaction processing.

The vendor server 120 may be in communication with a customer
15 terminal 130 that transmits data regarding a customer transaction (e.g. a purchase). Any number of customer terminals may be in communication with the vendor server 120. The customer terminal 130 may be a point of sale (POS) terminal, such as the NCR 7454 manufactured by NCR Corporation or the IBM 4683 manufactured by International Business Machines. As is known in the art, POS terminals perform such
20 processes as calculating the total price of a purchase (goods or services) and calculating the amount of change due to a customer. POS terminals may furthermore track purchases made and adjust databases of inventory accordingly.

In another embodiment, the customer terminal 130 may be a computer, such as those based on an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that are adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Such computers are able to appropriately access a Web page to communicate with a vendor server in a manner that is known to those skilled in the art.

In still other embodiments, the customer terminal 130 may be a telephone, an automated teller machine (ATM), slot machine, a vending machine or other device that receives payment from customers in exchange for providing goods or services. The vendor server in such an embodiment could include an IVRU (Interactive Voice Response Unit), such as the Vision 2001 or the Insight IVR/Web, both from Interactive Voice Technologies, Corp., or the OmniVox for Windows NT from APEX Voice Communications. An IVRU allows a user of a DTMF (Dual Tone Multi-Frequency) signal generating telephone to communicate with a computer. The DTMF signals received from the user's telephone are interpreted by the vendor server, and the vendor server may also communicate with the user by generating and transmitting voice or other audio signals, such as an list of IVRU menu options.

The use of the controller 110 is especially advantageous in an embodiment where a plurality of subsidizing vendors and/or a plurality of vendor servers serving customers participate in the described invention. A parent application, U.S. Patent Application No. 09/274,281 (attorney Docket No. 99-006) entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS VIA A CENTRAL AUTHORITY", filed March 22, 1999, the entirety of which is incorporated

by reference herein as part of the present disclosure, discloses an invention utilizing such a controller.

Referring to FIG. 1B, an apparatus 150 represents another embodiment of an apparatus for facilitating commerce in accordance with the present invention.

5 Specifically, in the apparatus 150 a vendor server 160 communicates with a customer terminal 170 and with a subsidizing vendor server 180 without the intervening controller 110. Accordingly, the embodiment illustrated by FIG. 1B is appropriate for a direct relationship between the vendor servicing customers and the subsidizing vendor.

Referring to FIG. 2, reference numeral 200 indicates a device that may
10 be the controller 110 (FIG. 1A). In another embodiment, the functionality of the device 200 may be performed by another device, such as the vendor server 160 (FIG. 1B), which operates to provide a customer with an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor.

The device 200 comprises a processor 202, such as an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor. The processor 202 is in communication with a data storage device
15 210, such as an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical and/or semiconductor memory. For example, the data storage device 210 may comprise one or more of a ROM, RAM and hard disk. The processor 202 and the data storage device 210 may each be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication medium, such as a serial port
20 cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof. In one embodiment, the controller 110 may comprise one or more computers that are connected to a remote server computer for maintaining databases.

The data storage device 210 stores a program 220 for controlling the processor 202. The processor 202 performs instructions of the program 220, and thereby operates in accordance with the present invention, and particularly in accordance with the methods described in detail herein. The program 220 furthermore includes program elements that may be necessary, such as an operating system and "device drivers" for allowing the processor 202 to interface with computer peripheral devices. Appropriate device drivers and other necessary program elements are known to those skilled in the art, and need not be described in detail herein.

The storage device 210 also stores (i) a customer database 230, (ii) a vendor database 240, (iii) a transaction database 250, (iv) a subsidizer database 260, (v) an offer rules database 270, (vi) an offers database 280 and (vii) an offer summary database 290. The databases 230, 240, 250, 260, 270, 280 and 290 are described in detail below and depicted with exemplary entries in the accompanying figures. As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the schematic illustrations and accompanying descriptions of the databases presented herein are exemplary arrangements for stored representations of information. A number of other arrangements may be employed besides those suggested by the tables shown. Similarly, the illustrated entries of the databases represent exemplary information, and those skilled in the art will understand that the number and content of the entries can be different from those illustrated herein.

FIG. 3 illustrates the vendor server 120 of FIG. 1A. As described above with reference to FIG. 1B, in one embodiment the vendor server may communicate with a subsidizing vendor server 180 without the intervening controller 110.

Accordingly, the description of the vendor server 120 is applicable to the vendor server 160 of FIG. 1B. In such an embodiment, the databases stored by the data storage device of the vendor server could include the databases depicted in FIGS. 2 and 3.

The vendor server 120 comprises a processor 302, such as an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, which is in communication with a customer terminal 315 and the controller 110. The processor 302 is also in communication with a data storage device 310, such as an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical and/or semiconductor memory. For example, the data storage device 310 may comprise one or more of a ROM, RAM and hard disk. The processor 302 and the data storage device 310 may each be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication medium, such as a serial port cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof. In one embodiment, the vendor server 120 may comprise one or more computers that are connected to a remote server computer for maintaining databases.

The data storage device 310 stores a program 320 for controlling the processor 302. The processor 302 performs instructions of the program 320, and thereby operates in accordance with the present invention, and particularly in accordance with the methods described in detail herein. The program 320 furthermore includes program elements that may be necessary, such as an operating system and "device drivers" for allowing the processor 302 to interface with computer peripheral devices. Appropriate device drivers and other necessary program elements are known to those skilled in the art, and need not be described in detail herein.

The storage device 310 also stores (i) a customer database 330, (ii) an item database 340, and (iii) a transaction database 350. The customer database 330 and the transaction database 350 of the vendor server 120 may be similar or identical to the customer database 230 and transaction database 250 of the controller 110. For
5 example, the controller 110 may store data that is derived from the vendor server 120, and vice versa. If each vendor server stores data on its own customers and its own transactions, the controller 110 could aggregate this data from each vendor server.

The databases 330, 340 and 350 are described in detail below and depicted with exemplary entries in the accompanying figures. As will be understood by
10 those skilled in the art, the schematic illustrations and accompanying descriptions of the databases presented herein are exemplary arrangements for stored representations of information. A number of other arrangements may be employed besides those suggested by the tables shown. Similarly, the illustrated entries of the databases represent exemplary information, and those skilled in the art will understand that the
15 number and content of the entries can be different from those illustrated herein.

Referring to FIG. 4, a table 400 represents an embodiment of the customer database 230 (FIG. 2) and/or the customer database 330 (FIG. 3). The table 400 includes entries 402, 404, 406 and 408, each defining a customer that may purchase items from a vendor. Such information may be determined, for example,
20 when a customer registers for a frequent shopper card. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 400 may include any number of entries. The table 400 also defines fields for each of the entries 402, 404, 406 and 408. The fields specify (i) a

customer identifier 420 that uniquely identifies the customer, (ii) a name 422 of the customer, (iii) a billing address 424 of the customer, (iv) credit card information 426 which may be used to render payment in purchasing the items, and (v) an electronic mail ("e-mail") address 428 for communication with the customer.

5 For each entry of the table 400, the data specified by fields 422, 424, 426 and 428 may be received from the corresponding customer (e.g. via the corresponding customer terminal and/or vendor server that interacts with the customer). For example, the data may be provided when the customer makes a purchase from a vendor's Web site by requiring the customer to enter information into an HTML form
10 provided on a Web page. Upon registration of a new customer, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would generate a unique customer identifier to store in the field 420 of the entry corresponding to the new customer. Once such information is stored for a customer, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate customer identifier.

15 Referring to FIG. 5, a table 500 represents an embodiment of the vendor database 240 (FIG. 2). The table 500 includes entries 502, 504, 506 and 508, each defining a vendor that services customers and may have those customers receive offers for subsidies. Such information may be determined when a vendor registers for participation in the subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will
20 understand that the table 500 may include any number of entries. The table 500 also defines fields for each of the entries 502, 504, 506 and 508. The fields specify (i) a vendor identifier 520 that uniquely identifies the vendor, (ii) a vendor name 522, (iii) a

vendor e-mail address 524 for communication with the vendor, and (iv) an amount owed 526 to the vendor (e.g. promised but unpaid subsidy amounts).

For each entry of the table 500, the data specified by fields 522 and 524 may be received from the corresponding vendor (e.g. via the corresponding vendor server). For example, the data may be provided when the vendor registers with the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A.. Upon registration of a new vendor, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would generate a unique vendor identifier to store in the field 520 of the entry corresponding to the new vendor. Once such information is stored for a vendor, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate vendor identifier.

Referring to FIG. 6, a table 600 represents an embodiment of the transaction database 250 (FIG. 2) and/or the transaction database 350 (FIG. 3). The table 600 includes entries 602, 604 and 606, each defining a transaction with a vendor server. Typically, the transaction includes a purchase of items by a customer. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 600 may include any number of entries. The table 600 also defines fields for each of the entries 602, 604 and 606. The fields specify (i) a transaction identifier 620 that uniquely identifies the transaction, (ii) a time 622 of the transaction, (iii) the items ordered 624, (iv) credit card information 626 that may define a credit card account that was charged to pay for the items purchased, (v) an amount charged 628 for the items, (vi) a delivery address 630 for the items, and (vii) a customer identifier 632 (if any) that identifies the customer that made the purchase.

For each entry of the table 600, the data specified by fields 624, 626, 628, 630 and 632 may be received via the corresponding customer terminal. For example, the items ordered may be identified by being scanned by a bar code scanner that transmits a representative signal to a POS terminal. Alternatively, the items
5 ordered may have been selected by a customer via a Web page displayed by his personal computer. Other ways to indicate items the customer desires to purchase will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Similarly, the credit card information may be read by a credit card reader that transmits a representative signal to a POS terminal. Alternatively, the credit card information may be entered by a customer into a form on
10 a Web page displayed by his personal computer. Those skilled in the art will understand that other payment identifiers besides credit card information may be employed, such as debit card numbers, electronic cash identifiers. The use herein of a credit card as a means of payment is merely exemplary and not limiting on the scope of the present invention.

15 The data may be transmitted from the customer device to the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or to the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B. A unique transaction identifier may be generated and the time of the transaction may be recorded (e.g. with reference to a clock signal generated by the customer terminal, vendor server, controller or other device). The transaction identifier
20 and the time are stored in the fields 620 and 622 respectively of the entry corresponding to the new transaction. Once such information is stored for a transaction, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate transaction identifier.

Referring to FIG. 7, a table 700 represents an embodiment of the subsidizer database 260 (FIG. 2). The table 700 includes entries 702, 704 and 706, each defining a subsidizing vendor that may subsidize purchases. Such information may be determined when a subsidizing vendor registers for participation in the

5 subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 700 may include any number of entries. The table 700 also defines fields for each of the entries 702, 704 and 706. The fields specify (i) a subsidizing vendor identifier 720 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (ii) a name 722 of the subsidizing vendor, (iii) an account 724 used to pay for the subsidies, (iv) an amount owed 726 by

10 the subsidizing vendor, and (v) a rank 728 used to prioritize subsidizing vendors and/or subsidies from those subsidizing vendors. The ranks may be established periodically (e.g. once per year) based on various criteria. For example, the ranks may be adjusted dynamically based on the acceptance rates of offers from the subsidizing vendors and/or amount of funds the subsidizing vendors have provided in connection with their

15 offers.

For each entry of the table 700, the data specified by fields 722 and 724 may be received from the corresponding subsidizing vendor (e.g. via the corresponding vendor server). For example, the data may be provided when the subsidizing vendor registers with the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or with the vendor

20 server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B. Upon registration of a new subsidizing vendor, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would generate a unique subsidizing vendor identifier to

store in the field 720 of the entry corresponding to the new subsidizing vendor. The amount owed is calculated and updated for each subsidizing vendor. Typically, the amount owed is updated when an offer from a particular subsidizing vendor is accepted by a customer. The rank of each subsidizing vendor is updated according to a ranking
5 scheme. For example, subsidizing vendors may pay for a preferential rank, and/or rank may be determined by the number (or percentage) of corresponding offers that are accepted. Once such information is stored for a subsidizing vendor, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate subsidizing vendor identifier.

Referring to FIG. 8, a table 800 represents an embodiment of the offer
10 rules database 270 (FIG. 2). The table 800 includes entries 802, 804, 806, 808 and 810, each defining, among other things, an offer rule. When an offer rule is satisfied during a transaction, the vendor provides an offer for a specified benefit, such as a subsidy. Such information may be determined when a subsidizing vendor registers for participation in the subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will
15 understand that the table 800 may include any number of entries. The table 800 also defines fields for each of the entries 802, 804, 806, 808 and 810. The fields specify (i) an offer rule identifier 820 that uniquely identifies the offer rule, (ii) a subsidizing vendor identifier 822 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (iii) customer activity 824 that is required in order for an offer to be provided, (iv) a subsidy amount
20 826, (v) when the offer rule is effective 828 (i.e. other requirements in order to satisfy the offer rule), and (vi) an additional transaction 830 that is required of the customer in

exchange for the subsidy. As described below, several types of transactions, such as additional purchases or initiating service agreements, may be required of the customer.

Some types of customer activity in a Web embodiment include a mouse click on a predetermined portion of a Web page, on a predetermined banner

5 advertisement, and on an indication of an item. Similarly, a mouse-over (indication of cursor location and/or movement) on a predetermined portion of a Web page and on predetermined portions of Web pages at least a predetermined number of times may be desirable customer activities. Such customer activity can indicate, for example, that the customer is evaluating particular products on the Web site by clicking on particular
10 links or placing the cursor over the links.

Some other types of customer activity in a Web embodiment include performing a search for a predetermined item, opening or accessing an electronic cash account (e.g. an e-cash "wallet"), accessing predetermined Web pages, a predetermined number of predetermined Web pages, predetermined Web pages in a predetermined
15 sequence, or predetermined Web pages during a predetermined time period; a duration that the Web site is open; and previous access to a predetermined Web site at least a predetermined number of times.

Other types of customer activity include a predetermined number of
20 items that a customer is ready to purchase from a vendor (indicated, for example, by the content of the customer's virtual shopping cart), one or more predetermined items that the customer is ready to purchase from a vendor, a duration that an item is selected for

purchase, requesting a coupon for a predetermined item, an item having at least a predetermined price that the customer is ready to purchase from the first vendor, at least a predetermined number of previous purchases from the first vendor, and frequent shopper status of the customer.

5 For each entry of the table 800, the data specified by fields 824, 826, 828 and 830 may be received from the corresponding subsidizing vendor (e.g. via the corresponding subsidizing vendor server) for each offer rule the subsidizing vendor establishes. For example, the data may be provided when the subsidizing vendor registers with the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or with the vendor
10 server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B. Upon creation of an offer rule, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would generate a unique offer rule identifier to store in the field 820 of the entry corresponding to the new offer rule. The corresponding subsidizing vendor identifier would also be stored in the field 822. Once such information is stored for an offer rule,
15 it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate offer rule identifier.

 The customer activity that is required in order for an offer to be provided may be set by the subsidizing vendor. Alternatively, the required customer activity may be set by the controller 110 for each subsidizing vendor. For example, the subsidizing vendor may be unable to decide which type of customer activity should be
20 required. In still another embodiment, the required customer activity may be set and thereafter dynamically adjusted based on acceptance rates of provided offers.

Referring to FIG. 9, a table 900 represents an embodiment of the offers database 280 (FIG. 2). The table 900 includes entries 902, 904, 906, 908 and 910, each defining an offer for a subsidy. The offer was provided to a customer during a transaction of the customer with the vendor. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 900 may include any number of entries. The table 900 also defines fields for each of the entries 902, 904, 906, 908 and 910. The fields specify (i) an offer identifier 920 that uniquely identifies the offer, (ii) a transaction identifier 922 that uniquely identifies the transaction during which the offer was provided, (iii) a subsidizing vendor identifier 924 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (iv) an identifier of an offer rule 926 that was applied during the transaction, (v) when the offer was provided 928, (vi) an expiration date 930 (if any) for the offer, (vii) a subsidy amount 932, (viii) a total price 934 that the customer would have to pay without the subsidy, (ix) a total price 936 that the customer would have to pay with the subsidy, and (x) when the offer was accepted 938 (if it was accepted). As described above with reference to FIG. 8, offer rules define specific subsidies. Thus, the identifier of an offer rule stored in field 926 may be used to determine a corresponding subsidy amount.

The subsidy amount may be a fixed amount, such as \$50. The subsidy amount may further be dependent on various criteria such as the purchase total. For example, the subsidy amount could be for the lesser of the purchase total and \$50.

Similarly, the subsidy amount could be for the lesser of a portion of the purchase total and \$50. For example, the subsidy amount could be for the lesser of \$50 and half the purchase total.

For each entry of the table 900, the data specified by fields 928, 934, 936 and 938 may be received from the corresponding customer terminal for each offer that has been provided. For example, when the offer is provided a new entry of the table 900 may be created. At that time, the date and time that the offer was provided may be recorded (e.g. with reference to a clock signal generated by the customer terminal, vendor server, controller or other device), and the total price and the total price with the subsidy amount may be received, e.g., from the POS terminal. The field 938 of the new entry would initially be set to "open" to indicate that the offer is open (not yet accepted or rejected). Field 922, 924 and 926 of the new entry would be set to the appropriate identifiers. Field 930 could be calculated from the field 928 (e.g. a predetermined time after the time in field 928 or "none" if there is no desired expiration date). Field 932 is determined from the corresponding offer rule applied, as described above with respect to field 826. Upon creation of an entry in the table 900, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would generate a unique offer identifier to store in the field 920. Once such information is stored for an offer, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate offer rule identifier. The field 938 may be updated when an offer is rejected or accepted.

Referring to FIG. 10, a table 1000 represents a record of an embodiment of the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2). The offer summary database 290 typically includes a plurality of records, each defining a summary of offers for subsidies that have been provided on behalf of a particular subsidizing vendor. The table 1000

includes a subsidizing vendor identifier 1002 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, a total number of offers provided 1004 on behalf of the subsidizing vendor, a total number of those offers that were accepted 1006, and a total amount 1008 of the subsidies due in connection with accepted offers.

5 The table 1000 also includes entries 1010 and 1012, each defining offers provided due to satisfaction of an offer rule of the subsidizing vendor. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 1000 may include any number of entries. The table 1000 also defines fields for each of the entries 1010 and 1012. The fields specify (i) an offer rule identifier 1020 that uniquely identifies the offer rule, (ii) a number 1022
10 of offers provided due to the offer rule, (iii) a number 1024 of these offers that were accepted, and (iv) an amount 1026 of the subsidies due in connection with these accepted offers. If desirable, the information stored in the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2) may be organized by the vendor through which the offer was provided. Such an embodiment would allow a comparison of the acceptance rate of offers at different
15 vendors.

For each subsidizing vendor, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would create a record such as the record 1000 and store the subsidizing vendor identifier 1002. For each offer rule associated with the subsidizing vendor, a corresponding entry is created and the
20 offer rule identifier is stored in field 1020. For each entry in the record, the data specified by fields 1022, 1024 and 1026 may be adjusted as offers are provided and acceptances of the offers are received. For example, when an offer is provided, the

corresponding offer rule is identified and thus the corresponding entry is identified. The field 1022 of that entry is increased by one to reflect the newly-provided offer. Similarly, when an offer is accepted, field 1024 of that entry is increased by one to reflect the new acceptance and the amount of the subsidy associated with the accepted offer is added to the field 1026 of the entry.

The sum of the number of offers indicated by the field 1022 for all entries is stored as the total number of offers 1004 for the corresponding record. Similarly, the number of offers accepted indicated by the field 1024 for all entries is stored as the total number of offers accepted 1006 for the corresponding record, and the sum of the amounts indicated by the field 1026 for all entries is stored as the total amount 1008 for the corresponding record. Once such information is stored for a subsidizing vendor, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate subsidizing vendor identifier. Accordingly, information for, e.g., account reconciliation for each subsidizing vendor may be derived from such information.

Referring to FIG. 11, a table 1100 represents a record of another embodiment of the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2). In the illustrated embodiment, information is organized by offer rule. In one embodiment, for each offer rule various types of customer activity may have been required. The results of each type of customer activity are summarized in the record.

Various types of customer activity may be required for an offer rule in order to test which customer activities are relatively successful in soliciting an acceptance of an offer. For example, every hour a different customer activity may be

required in order for an offer to be provided in accordance with the offer rule. In such an embodiment, each hour the controller 110 (FIG. 1A) may update the customer activity field 824 of an entry of the offer rules database 270 to reflect the new customer activity that is required. The most successful customer activity requirement may then

5 be used in the future.

The offer summary database 290 can include a plurality of records, each defining a summary of offers for subsidies that have been provided in response to a customer activity in accordance with the offer rule. The table 1100 includes an offer rule identifier 1102 that uniquely identifies the offer rule. The table 1100 also includes

10 entries 1104, 1106 and 1108. Each entry defines offers provided in accordance with the offer rule and upon certain customer activity. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 1100 may include any number of entries. The table 1100 also defines fields for each of the entries 1104, 1106 and 1108. The fields specify (i) customer activity 1120 required for the offer, (ii) a number 1122 of offers provided due to the

15 particular customer activity for the offer rule, (iii) a number 1124 of these offers that were accepted, and (iv) an acceptance rate 1126 (the ratio of offers accepted to number of offers provided). If desirable, the information stored in the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2) may be organized according to other information.

For each offer rule, the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, or

20 the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B, would create a record such as the record 1100 and store the offer rule identifier 1102. For each customer activity that was or is associated with the offer rule, a corresponding entry is created and an

indication of the customer activity is stored in field 1120. For each entry in the record, the data specified by fields 1122, 1124 and 1126 may be adjusted as offers are provided and acceptances of the offers are received. For example, when an offer is provided in response to a particular customer activity, the corresponding entry is identified. The

5 field 1122 of that entry is increased by one to reflect the newly-provided offer.

Similarly, when an offer is accepted, field 1124 of that entry is increased by one to reflect the new acceptance and the acceptance rate is calculated and stored in the field 1126 of the entry. Once such information is stored for an offer rule, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate offer rule identifier.

10 Referring to FIG. 12, a table 1200 represents an embodiment of the item database 340 (FIG. 3). The table 1200 includes entries 1202 and 1204, each defining an item sold via a vendor server. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 1200 may include any number of entries. The table 1200 also defines fields for each of the entries 1202 and 1204. The fields specify (i) a item identifier 1220 that uniquely
15 identifies the item, (ii) an item description 1222, (iii) an item price 1224 for which the item is typically sold, and (iv) an availability 1226 of the item which may be based on an inventory level of the item.

For each entry of the table 1200, the data specified by fields 1222, 1224 and 1226 may be received from the corresponding vendor. For example, the data may
20 be provided when a vendor prepares to sell the item. Upon the entering of a new item, the vendor server would generate a unique customer identifier to store in the field 1220

of the entry corresponding to the new item. Once such information is stored for an item, it may be retrieved upon reference to the appropriate item identifier.

Referring to FIG. 13, a flow chart 1300 illustrates an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit (e.g. a reduced price) to a customer that is to purchase items from a vendor. Although the illustrated method is described below as being performed by the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, the illustrated method may alternatively be performed by the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B.

Information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor is received (step 1302). Such information may be received via a Web server, for example, in an embodiment where a vendor sells via the Internet. The Web server, which may be the vendor server, may receive data from the customer terminal that indicates, for example, hyperlinks that the customer clicks on, buttons that the customer actuates, or mouse movements of the customer terminal.

The information may be received from a "cookie" stored on the customer terminal (e.g. on a personal computer of the customer). Such a cookie is a block of data that a Web server (e.g. the vendor server) stores on a client system (e.g. a customer terminal). When a user returns to the same Web site, the browser of the customer terminal sends a copy of the cookie back to the Web server. Cookies may be used to identify users of the customer terminal, to instruct the Web server to send a customized version of a Web page, to submit account information for the user, and for other administrative purposes.

The information may be received via a telephone, for example, in an embodiment where a vendor sells via an IVRU. The information may also be received via a POS terminal, for example, in an embodiment where a vendor sells at a retail store. The POS terminal receives data such as UPC codes that identify items scanned
5 with a bar code scanner, prices of those items, and information received from a customer's frequent shopper card. Similarly, the information may be received via a device, such as a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) or a scanner mounted on a shopping cart, that the customer uses to indicate the items he has selected for purchase or the items in which he is otherwise interested.

10 The information may also be received via a sensor that senses the presence or location of a customer. For example, infrared or pressure sensors may be disposed in a store and operable to sense when a customer is near particular products or areas.

The information may also be received via a device that scans items with
15 a bar code scanner and provides the prices of those items that are scanned. Such devices are known and are frequently disposed in supermarkets to allow customers to determine the prices of items, especially items that are on sale or otherwise subject to special pricing.

It is then determined whether an offer for a subsidy should be provided
20 (step 1304). In one embodiment, the information relating to customer activity dictates whether the offer is provided. For example, as described in detail below there may be one or more rules specifying customer activity that is required. If an offer should not

be provided, then the controller 110 interacts with the customer conventionally (step 1306).

Otherwise, an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor is determined (step 1308). For example, in an embodiment where one or more rules are included, if a rule is satisfied a corresponding offer for a subsidy is provided. An indication of the offer (or offers) is provided to the customer (step 1310). For example, text and/or images may be displayed on a Web page that is displayed on the customer terminal, text may be displayed on a monitor of a POS terminal, or an audio signal may be transmitted via an IVRU to a telephone.

The indication of the offer may be provided via a device, such as a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) or a display mounted on a shopping cart of the customer, that accompanies the customer as he browses a store. Similarly, a display disposed in a particular location in the store (e.g. below a product display) may provide an offer to a customer that is near particular products or areas.

The indication of the offer may be provided via a device that scans items with a bar code scanner and provides the prices of those items scanned. In one embodiment, such a device could display an offer upon scanning the bar code of an item.

The offer typically specifies a subsidy amount and an obligation to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy. For example, an additional transaction may be required of the customer. In an embodiment where the second vendor provides services, the customer may be required to sign up for a service that is provided by the

second vendor (e.g. initiate a service agreement with the second vendor). The customer may be required to switch from a current service provider to the second vendor, so that the service will no longer be provided by the current service provider.

Examples of services include telephone service, Internet service,

5 banking services, credit card account services, insurance service, securities trading service, utilities service, satellite television service, or cable television service.

Telephone service can include long distance service such as is provided by Sprint Communications Company, L.P or wireless service such as is provided by AT & T.

Signing up for banking services may include the requirement to transfer a particular
10 minimum balance to a new bank account. Signing up for credit card account services may similarly include the requirement to apply for a credit card account and/or transfer a particular minimum balance to a new or existing credit card account. Signing up for securities trading services may include the requirement to open an account with a particular minimum balance amount.

15 The controller 110 receives an indication of items the customer desires to purchase (step 1312). For example, the items may have been scanned by a bar code scanner and thus identified by a POS terminal. Alternatively, the items may have been selected by a customer via a Web page and put in a virtual "shopping cart". Other ways to indicate items the customer desires to purchase will be apparent to those skilled in
20 the art.

The controller 110 also receives a response to the offer from the customer terminal (step 1314). The customer may indicate his response by, for

example, clicking a button on a Web page, actuating particular keys on a touch-tone telephone, actuating a button on a keypad in communication with a POS terminal, or verbally responding to a cashier that actuates buttons on the POS terminal.

If the response does not indicate an acceptance of the offer (step 1316),
5 then the controller 110 interacts with the customer conventionally (step 1306).
Otherwise, the offer is accepted and the customer is charged a lower price for the items than he otherwise would have been charged (step 1318). The customer may even get the items for free or receive a credit (e.g. money back or store credit). In another embodiment, the benefit to the customer may be different than a reduced price on the
10 items he desires to purchase. For example, the customer may be given a product upgrade to another (higher value) item or the customer may be given an additional item at a discount or for free. The customer may also be provided with cash, store credit or other monetary award.

The customer may be charged the lower price in single transaction. For
15 example, if an item is normally sold for \$80, but is sold to a particular customer for \$60 in connection with an offer for a subsidy, a credit card account of the customer may be charged \$60 in one transaction. Alternatively, the customer's credit card account may be charged \$80, and then subsequently credited for \$20 ($\$20 = \$80 - \60).

Referring to FIG. 14, a flow chart 1400 illustrates an embodiment of a
20 method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to purchase items from a vendor. In particular, in the illustrated embodiment one or more rules determine which offers (if any) are provided to a customer. Although the illustrated method is

described below as being performed by the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, the illustrated method may alternatively be performed by the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B.

Information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first
5 vendor is received (step 1402), as described above. The controller selects an offer rule to evaluate against the customer activity (step 1404). The rule may be defined by and selected from the offer rules database 270 (FIG. 2). For example, referring again to FIG. 8, each entry of the table 800 defines an offer rule. Accordingly, the controller 110 may select an entry of the offer rules database 270 (e.g. starting with the first
10 entry).

As described above, each offer rule includes customer activity that is required in order for an offer to be provided. Accordingly, the received information relating to customer activity may be compared with the customer activity that is required by the offer rule (step 1406). If the customer activity does not satisfy the offer
15 rule, then it is determined whether there are more offer rules that have not yet been so compared to the received information (step 1408). If there are not any more offer rules, then the controller 110 interacts conventionally with the customer (step 1410).

If there are more offer rules, then another offer rule is selected (step 1404). For example, the next entry in the offer rules database 270 may be selected.
20 Those skilled in the art will realize that the offer rules need not be selected according to the sequence defined by the offer rules database 270.

If the customer activity does satisfy the offer rule, then the controller 110 determines if the offer rule is otherwise effective (step 1412). For example, referring to FIG. 8, each entry of the table 800 defines other requirements necessary in order to satisfy the offer rule (i.e. the field 828). If the rule is not otherwise effective (i.e. the other requirements are not satisfied), then it is determined whether there are more offer rules that have not yet been so compared to the received information (step 1408). If there are not any more offer rules, then the controller 110 interacts conventionally with the customer (step 1410). Otherwise, another offer rule is selected (step 1404).

If the offer rule is otherwise effective, then the controller 110 generates an offer (step 1414). The offer indicates the subsidy amount (specified by the field 826 of the corresponding entry) and an additional transaction required (specified by the field 830 of the corresponding entry). An indication of the offer is provided to the customer (step 1416), as described above. If there any more offer rules, then they are in turn selected and evaluated as described above.

The illustrated method allows one or more offers to be provided to a customer. The customer may in turn accept an offer as described above. In particular, if a plurality of offers are provided to the customer substantially simultaneously, the customer may be asked to select one (or more) of the plurality, and the selection would indicate an acceptance of the selected offer. Alternatively, if a plurality of offers are provided sequentially (i.e. another offer is provided if a prior offer is not accepted),

then the sequence of the offers may be defined by, for example, the ranks of the corresponding subsidizing vendors.

Referring to FIGS. 15A and 15B, a flow chart 1500 illustrates an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to purchase items from a vendor. In particular, in the illustrated embodiment a customer receives a subsidy subject to an obligation. The customer may receive an immediate benefit in exchange for participating or agreeing to participate in a transaction with the second vendor. For example, the customer may be required to participate in a future transaction with the second vendor. Although the illustrated method is described below as being performed by the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, the illustrated method may alternatively be performed by the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B.

Information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor is received (step 1502). It is then determined whether an offer for a subsidy should be provided (step 1504). If an offer should not be provided, then the controller 110 interacts with the customer conventionally (step 1506). Otherwise, an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor is determined (step 1508). For example, the information relating to customer activity may satisfy a rule, and the rule in turn specifies an offer. The controller 110 provides an indication of the offer (including its associated obligation) to the customer (step 1510).

The controller 110 receives an indication of items the customer desires to purchase (step 1512). The controller 110 also receives a credit card account

identifier (step 1514), such as a credit card number. The credit card account identifier may be received, for example, via a credit card authorization terminal that is in communication with a POS terminal, as is known to those skilled in the art.

The credit card account is charged a lower price for the items than
5 otherwise would have been charged (step 1516). The customer may even get the items for free. The controller 110 determines whether the customer has fulfilled the obligation of the offer (step 1518). For example, the obligation could be a requirement to sign up for a service provided by the second vendor. In such an embodiment, the second vendor may provide, for example, telephone service, Internet service, banking
10 services, credit card account services, insurance service, securities trading service, satellite television service, or cable television service. The obligation may further include a requirement that the service be maintained for a particular amount of time.

In some embodiments, the customer may have been required to fulfill the obligation before his credit card account is charged. For example, the customer
15 may have been required to fill out a credit card application before completing the purchase of his items. In other embodiments, the obligation may be need to be fulfilled at still other times.

The controller 110 can access a list of new or existing customers to determine whether the customer has fulfilled his obligation by signing up (and therefore
20 becoming a new customer). The controller 110 could access such a list periodically (e.g. every week) or upon demand (e.g. the controller receives the names of new customers as they become available). Alternatively, the controller 110 could query the

subsidizing vendor server, and in response receive a signal that indicates whether the customer had signed up for service from the second vendor. Similarly, the customer could be required to switch service providers from another service provider to the second vendor.

5 If the customer has fulfilled the obligation, then the controller 110 records the time and date the obligation was fulfilled (step 1520). The time and date may be stored, for example, in the field 938 of the entry corresponding to the offer. In such an embodiment, fulfilling the obligation may be considered acceptance of the offer.

10 If the customer has not fulfilled the obligation, then it is determined whether the offer has expired (step 1522). The expiration date and time of an offer is indicated by the field 930 of the offers database 280 (FIG. 2), and may be calculated based on the time the offer was provided. If the offer has expired without the obligation being fulfilled, the credit card account of the customer is charged for the
15 difference between the item price and the lower price previously charged (step 1524). This step assesses a penalty against the customer by removing the benefit that was previously provided to the customer if the customer does not fulfill the obligation within the allotted time. For example, if the credit card account was previously charged \$80 (in one or more transactions) in step 1516 for a \$95 item, then in step 1524 the
20 credit card account is charged \$15 ($\$15 = \$95 - \80). Thus, if the obligation is not fulfilled, the credit card account is charged \$95 in total (\$80 and \$15), which is the conventional price for the item. An even larger amount may be charged (i.e. greater

than \$15 in the above example) if desired to deter customers from reneging on the obligation.

Referring to FIG. 16, a flow chart 1600 illustrates an embodiment of a method for determining whether customers have fulfilled their obligations associated with an offer for a benefit. Although the illustrated method is described below as being performed by the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, the illustrated method may alternatively be performed by the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B.

In the illustrated embodiment the obligation is to become a new customer of a subsidizing vendor. For example, the customer may have been obliged to initiate a new service agreement so that a particular service is provided to the customer by the subsidizing vendor. Those skilled in the art will understand the various modifications required in embodiments with other types of obligations.

The controller 110 selects a customer from a list of new customers (step 1602) of the subsidizing vendor. The list of new customers may be generated by the subsidizing vendor and transmitted to the controller 110 periodically (e.g. every week) or upon request. Such a list may be compiled by the subsidizing vendor as customers sign up for service and/or complete prerequisites for becoming a customer. Customers may be selected from the list, for example, in the order that they signed up during a predetermined period of time.

The controller 110 then determines if the selected customer has been offered a subsidy (step 1604). The controller may determine whether the selected

customer is represented in any entry of the offers database 280. For example, referring again to FIG. 9, each entry of the table 900 includes in field 922 an indication of the transaction during which the offer was provided. The corresponding entry of the transaction database 250 in turn indicates a customer identifier (e.g. the field 632 of the table 600). If the selected customer has not been offered a subsidy, then the controller 110 determines whether there are more customers that have not yet been selected (step 1610). Another customer is selected (step 1602) as long as there are more customers in the list that have not been selected.

If the selected customer has been offered a subsidy, the controller 110 determines if the offer for the subsidy included an obligation to become a customer of the subsidizing vendor (step 1606). For example, referring again to FIG. 9, each entry of the table 900 includes in field 926 an indication of the offer rule applied during the transaction. The corresponding entry of the offer rules database 270 in turn indicates an additional transaction required of the customer (e.g. in the field 830 of the table 800). Thus, the controller 110 determines whether the presence of the selected customer on the list of new customers indicates fulfillment of a previous obligation.

If the offer for the subsidy included an obligation to become a customer of the subsidizing vendor, then the controller 110 records that the selected customer has fulfilled his obligation (step 1608). For example, the time and date that the customer became a new customer of the subsidizing vendor may be recorded in the field 938 of the corresponding entry of the table 900. Then additional customers, if any, are selected and processed similarly (e.g., steps 1610 and 1602). Customers that have not

fulfilled their respective obligations may eventually be penalized in some manner, for example, by charging their credit card accounts a penalty fee amount.

In contrast to the above-described method, the controller 100 could search a list of customers that have accepted offers, rather than a list of new customers, in order to determine whether those customers have become new customers of the specified vendor.

Referring to FIG. 17, a flow chart 1700 illustrates an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit after a customer has made a purchase from a first vendor. Although the illustrated method is described below as being performed by the controller 110 in the embodiment of FIG. 1A, the illustrated method may alternatively be performed by the vendor server 160 in the embodiment of FIG. 1B.

The controller 110 selects a customer from the list of customers that have purchased from the first vendor (step 1702). For example, as is known in the art the first vendor may record the name, address, telephone number and/or e-mail address of each customer that purchases items within a predetermined time period (e.g. each month). The customer selected from the list may be, for example, the first customer that purchased items during a predetermined period of time. When a customer makes a purchase, the vendor server may determine if contact information of the customer is stored. For example, the vendor server may determine whether the customer is a member of a frequent shopper program (in which contact information is typically obtained upon registration). Alternatively, it may be determined whether the customer filled in a form on a Web page that requests contact information. If contact information

of the customer is not stored, the vendor server can then request contact information of the customer, and wait for the customer to provide that contact information.

The controller then determines whether the selected customer should be provided an offer for a subsidy (step 1704) from a second vendor, as described above.

- 5 If the customer should not be provided with an offer for a subsidy, then the controller determines whether there are more customers on the list (step 1708). If so, then another customer is selected (step 1702).

If the customer should be provided with an offer for a subsidy, then the controller 110 provides an indication of the offer for a subsidy to the selected customer
10 using contact information of the customer (step 1706). The indication of an offer may be provided, for example, via e-mail, postal mail, and/or telephone. For example, the controller 110 may generate a textual message specifying the offer, and then transmit that message via e-mail to an e-mail address of the customer. The controller 110 may also generate a textual message which is printed onto a sheet of paper, and a postal mail
15 address which is printed onto a mailing label. The mailing label is used in directing the sheet of paper to the customer via conventional postal mail. For example, the offer may be provided on a credit card billing statement of the customer. The controller 110 may also generate an audio message which is transmitted via a telephone to the customer by connecting to the appropriate telephone number.

- 20 Although the present invention has been described with respect to a preferred embodiment thereof, those skilled in the art will note that various substitutions may be made to those embodiments described herein without departing

from the spirit and scope of the present invention. For example, although in many of the described embodiments above the benefit provided to the customer is a subsidy, there are many other types of benefits which are contemplated by the present invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

5 providing, in response to the received information, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

10 charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

2. The method of claim 1, in which the step of receiving information relating to customer activity comprises:

reading information from a cookie.

3. The method of claim 1, in which the step of receiving information relating to customer activity comprises:

15 receiving information via at least one of a Web server, a telephone and a POS terminal.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the indication of an offer for a subsidy is provided via at least one of e-mail, postal mail, and telephone.

5. The method of claim 1, in which the step of charging the customer the second price for the at least one item comprises:

5 charging the customer the total price; and
crediting an amount of funds to an account, the amount of funds being based on a difference between the total price and the second price.

6. The method of claim 5, in which the step of crediting is performed after the step of charging the total price.

10 7. The method of claim 5, in which the step of crediting comprises:
crediting the amount of funds to a credit card account.

8. The method of claim 1, in which the step of charging the customer the second price for the at least one item comprises:

charging the second price to an account in one transaction.

15 9. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity.

10. The method of claim 9, in which the step of determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity comprises:

determining if the information relating to customer activity satisfies at least one rule.

5 11. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

determining if the information relating to customer activity satisfies at least one rule.

12. The method of claim 11, in which the step of providing, in response to the received indication, an indication of an offer for a subsidy is performed if the

10 information relating to customer activity satisfies at least one rule.

13. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

determining an offer for a subsidy from the second vendor based on the information relating to customer activity.

14. The method of claim 13, further comprising:

15 determining an offer for a subsidy from the second vendor based on a rule and the information relating to customer activity.

15. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

determining an offer for a subsidy from the second vendor if the information indicates a willingness to transact.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

5 receiving a response to the offer.

17. The method of claim 16, further comprising:

determining whether the response was received within a predetermined period of time.

18. The method of claim 17, in which the step of charging is performed only if the

10 response indicates acceptance of the offer and if the response was received within the predetermined period of time.

19. The method of claim 17, in which the predetermined period of time is a

predetermined amount of time after the indication of an offer was provided.

20. The method of claim 16, in which the step of charging is performed only if the

15 response indicates acceptance of the offer.

21. The method of claim 1, in which the offer for the subsidy defines an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy; and further comprising:

receiving an indication that the customer has fulfilled the obligation.

22. The method of claim 21, in which the step of receiving an indication that the customer has fulfilled the obligation comprises:

receiving an indication that the customer has switched service providers.

23. The method of claim 21, in which the step of receiving an indication that the customer has switched service providers comprises:

determining a new customer of the second vendor; and

determining if the new customer had been offered a subsidy.

24. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

switching providers of a service that is provided to the customer.

25. The method of claim 24, in which the service comprises at least one of:

telephone service, Internet service, banking services, credit card account

services, insurance service, securities trading service, utilities service, satellite television service, and cable television service.

26. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

initiating a new service agreement so that a particular service is provided to the customer by the second vendor.

27. The method of claim 26, in which the service comprises at least one of:
telephone service, Internet service, banking services, credit card account

5 services, insurance service, securities trading service, utilities service, satellite
television service, and cable television service.

28. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

29. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
10 soliciting agreement by the customer to participate in a transaction with the
second vendor.

30. The method of claim 29, further comprising:
determining whether the customer participated in a transaction with the second
vendor.

15 31. The method of claim 29, further comprising:
assessing a penalty if the customer did not participate in the transaction.

32. The method of claim 1, in which the information relating to customer activity comprises an indication of at least one of:

a mouse click on a predetermined portion of a Web page;

a mouse click on a predetermined banner advertisement;

5 a mouse click on an indication of an item;

a mouse-over on a predetermined portion of a Web page; and

mouse-overs on predetermined portions of Web pages at least a predetermined number of times.

33. The method of claim 1, in which the information relating to customer activity
10 comprises an indication of at least one of:

a search that is performed for a predetermined product;

accessing predetermined Web pages;

accessing a predetermined number of predetermined Web pages;

accessing predetermined Web pages in a predetermined sequence;

15 accessing predetermined Web pages during a predetermined time period;

a duration that the Web site is open; and

previous access to a predetermined Web site at least a predetermined number of times.

34. The method of claim 1, in which the information relating to customer activity
20 comprises an indication of at least one of:

a predetermined number of items that a customer is ready to purchase from the first vendor;

a predetermined item that the customer is ready to purchase from the first vendor;

5 a duration that an item is selected for purchase;

requesting a coupon for a predetermined item;

an item having at least a predetermined price that the customer is ready to purchase from the first vendor;

at least a predetermined number of previous purchases from the first vendor;

10 and

frequent shopper status of the customer.

35. The method of claim 1, in which the offer defines at least one of:

a reduction in the price charged for the at least one item;

the second vendor; and

15 an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy.

36. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity with a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

20 determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;
receiving a response to the offer;
receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the
at least one item having an associated total price; and

5 charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the response
indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

37. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer has purchased for a
total price from a first vendor;

10 receiving contact information of the customer;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

providing an indication of the offer using the contact information;

receiving a response to the offer;

receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account;

15 and

crediting an amount of funds to the credit card account if the response indicates
that the offer is accepted.

38. The method of claim 37, further comprising:

determining if contact information of the customer is stored; and

requesting contact information of the customer if contact information of the customer is not stored.

39. The method of claim 37, in which the step of receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer has purchased comprises:

5 receiving an indication of items that a plurality of customers have purchased.

40. The method of claim 39, in which the step of receiving an indication of items that a plurality of customers have purchased is performed at predetermined times.

41. A method, comprising the steps of:

10 receiving information relating to customer activity on a Web site of a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

15 displaying, via a Web page on the Web site, an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receiving customer input via the Web site, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and
charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that
the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

42. A method, comprising the steps of:

5 receiving information relating to customer activity at a POS terminal of a first
vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information
relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

10 outputting at the POS terminal an indication of the offer for the subsidy from
the second vendor;

receiving customer input via the POS terminal, the customer input representing
a response to the offer;

15 receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at
least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that
the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

43. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity with an IVRU of a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

5 determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

transmitting via the IVRU an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receiving via the IVRU a customer input that represents a response to the offer;

10 receiving via the IVRU a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving via the IVRU a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

15 44. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

20 determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the offer defining an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy;

providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;
receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the
at least one item having an associated total price;
receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account;
5 charging a second price to the credit card account, the second price being less
than the total price;
determining whether the customer has fulfilled the obligation; and
charging a discount amount to the credit card account if the customer has not
fulfilled the obligation, the discount amount being based on a difference between the
10 total price and the second price.

45. The method of claim 44, in which the step of determining whether the customer
has fulfilled the obligation comprises:

receiving an indication that the customer has switched service providers.

46. The method of claim 44, in which the step of determining whether the customer
15 has fulfilled the obligation comprises:

determining whether the customer has become a new customer of the second
vendor.

47. The method of claim 44, in which the step of charging a second price to the
credit card account comprises:

charging the second price to the credit card account in one transaction.

48. The method of claim 44, in which the step of charging a second price to the credit card account comprises:

charging the total price to the credit card account; and

5 crediting the discount amount to the credit card account.

49. A method, comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

10 providing, in response to the received indication, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a response to the offer; and

15 providing the at least one item to the customer for free if the response indicates acceptance of the offer.

50. The method of claim 49, further comprising:

providing a credit to the customer if the response indicates acceptance of the offer.

51. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with
a first vendor;

means for providing, in response to the received information, an indication of an
5 offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

means for receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to
purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

means for charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the
offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

10 52. An apparatus, comprising:

a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

15 receive information relating to customer activity of a customer with a
first vendor;

provide, in response to the received information, an indication of an
offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

20 receive an indication of at least one item the customer desires to
purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

charge the customer a second price for the at least one item if the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

53. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:

5 receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

providing, in response to the received information, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

10 receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

54. An apparatus, comprising:

15 means for receiving information relating to customer activity with a first vendor;

means for determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

means for determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

20 means for providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

means for receiving a response to the offer;

means for receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

means for charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

55. An apparatus, comprising:

a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and
the processor operative with the program to:

receive information relating to customer activity with a first vendor;

determine whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

provide an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receive a response to the offer;

receive an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and

charge the customer a second price for the at least one item if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

56. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
- 5 implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:
- receiving information relating to customer activity with a first vendor;
 - determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;
 - determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;
 - 10 providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;
 - receiving a response to the offer;
 - receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price; and
 - charging the customer a second price for the at least one item if the response
 - 15 indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

57. An apparatus, comprising:
- means for receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer has purchased for a total price from a first vendor;
 - means for receiving contact information of the customer;
 - 20 means for determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

means for providing an indication of the offer using the contact information;

means for receiving a response to the offer;

means for receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

5 means for crediting an amount of funds to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted.

58. An apparatus, comprising:

a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

10 the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and the processor operative with the program to:

receive an indication of at least one item that a customer has purchased for a total price from a first vendor;

receive contact information of the customer;

15 determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

provide an indication of the offer using the contact information;

receive a response to the offer;

receive a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

20 credit an amount of funds to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted.

59. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:

receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer has purchased for a total price from a first vendor;

5 receiving contact information of the customer;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

providing an indication of the offer using the contact information;

receiving a response to the offer;

receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account;

10 and

crediting an amount of funds to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted.

60. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving information relating to customer activity on a Web site of a

15 first vendor;

means for determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

means for determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

means for displaying, via a Web page on the Web site, an indication of the offer

20 for the subsidy from the second vendor;

means for receiving customer input via the Web site, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

means for receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

5 means for receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account;
and

means for charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

61. An apparatus, comprising:

10 a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

receive information relating to customer activity on a Web site of a first

15 vendor;

determine whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

20 display, via a Web page on the Web site, an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receive customer input via the Web site, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

receive a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

5 receive a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and
charge a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

62. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:

10 receiving information relating to customer activity on a Web site of a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

15 displaying, via a Web page on the Web site, an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receiving customer input via the Web site, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

20 receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

63. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving information relating to customer activity at a POS terminal

5 of a first vendor;

means for determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

means for determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

10 means for outputting at the POS terminal an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

means for receiving customer input via the POS terminal, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

means for receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

15 means for receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

means for charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

64. An apparatus, comprising:

20 a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,
the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and
the processor operative with the program to:

- 5 receive information relating to customer activity at a POS terminal of a
first vendor;
determine whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the
information relating to customer activity;
determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;
output at the POS terminal an indication of the offer for the subsidy
10 from the second vendor;
receive customer input via the POS terminal, the customer input
representing a response to the offer;
receive a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase,
the at least one item having an associated total price;
15 receive a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and
charge a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates
that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

65. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:
20 receiving information relating to customer activity at a POS terminal of a first
vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

outputting at the POS terminal an indication of the offer for the subsidy from
5 the second vendor;

receiving customer input via the POS terminal, the customer input representing a response to the offer;

receiving a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

10 receiving a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and
charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

66. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving information relating to customer activity with an IVRU of a
15 first vendor;

means for determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

means for transmitting via the IVRU an indication of the offer for the subsidy
20 from the second vendor;

means for receiving via the IVRU a customer input that represents a response to the offer;

means for receiving via the IVRU a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

5 means for receiving via the IVRU a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

means for charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

67. An apparatus, comprising:

10 a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

15 receive information relating to customer activity with an IVRU of a first vendor;

determine whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

20 transmit via the IVRU an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receive via the IVRU a customer input that represents a response to the offer;

receive via the IVRU a selection of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

5 receive via the IVRU a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

charge a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

68. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
10 implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:
receiving information relating to customer activity with an IVRU of a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

15 determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;
transmitting via the IVRU an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receiving via the IVRU a customer input that represents a response to the offer;

receiving via the IVRU a selection of at least one item the customer desires to
20 purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving via the IVRU a credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account; and

charging a second price to the credit card account if the response indicates that the offer is accepted, the second price being less than the total price.

5 69. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

means for determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

10 means for determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the offer defining an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy;

means for providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

15 means for receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

means for receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account;

means for charging a second price to the credit card account, the second price being less than the total price;

20 means for determining whether the customer has fulfilled the obligation; and

means for charging a discount amount to the credit card account if the customer has not fulfilled the obligation, the discount amount being based on a difference between the total price and the second price.

70. An apparatus, comprising:

5 a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

receive information relating to customer activity of a customer with a

10 first vendor;

determine whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determine an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the offer defining an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy;

15 provide an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receive an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receive a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card

20 account;

charge a second price to the credit card account, the second price being less than the total price;

determine whether the customer has fulfilled the obligation; and

charge a discount amount to the credit card account if the customer has not fulfilled the obligation, the discount amount being based on a difference between the total price and the second price.

71. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:

receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

determining whether to provide an offer for a subsidy based on the information relating to customer activity;

determining an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the offer defining an obligation for the customer to fulfill in exchange for the subsidy;

providing an indication of the offer for the subsidy from the second vendor;

receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a credit card account identifier that identifies a credit card account;

charging a second price to the credit card account, the second price being less than the total price;

determining whether the customer has fulfilled the obligation; and

charging a discount amount to the credit card account if the customer has not fulfilled the obligation, the discount amount being based on a difference between the total price and the second price.

72. An apparatus, comprising:

5 means for receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

means for providing, in response to the received indication, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

10 means for receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

means for receiving a response to the offer; and

means for providing the at least one item to the customer for free if the response indicates acceptance of the offer.

73. An apparatus, comprising:

15 a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

20 receive information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

provide, in response to the received indication, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

receive an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

5 receive a response to the offer; and

provide the at least one item to the customer for free if the response indicates acceptance of the offer.

74. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for implementing a method performed by a computer, the method comprising the steps of:

10 receiving information relating to customer activity of a customer with a first vendor;

providing, in response to the received indication, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor;

15 receiving an indication of at least one item the customer desires to purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;

receiving a response to the offer; and

providing the at least one item to the customer for free if the response indicates acceptance of the offer.

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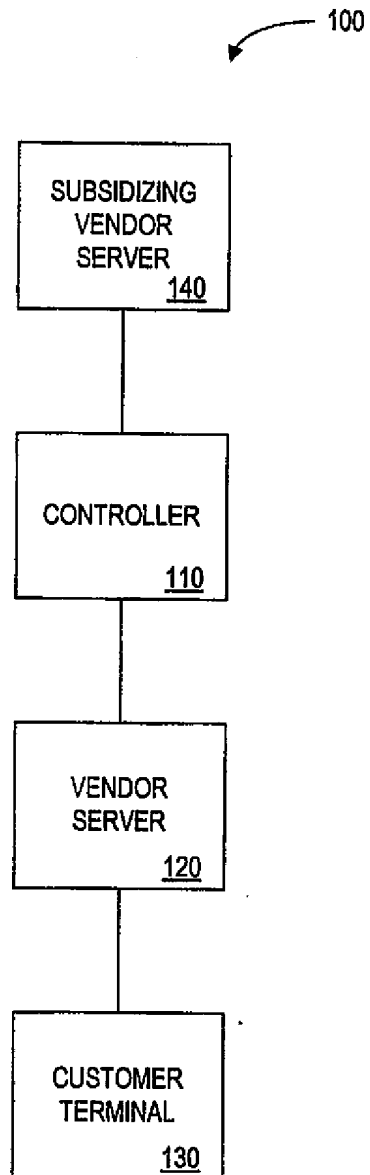


FIG. 1A

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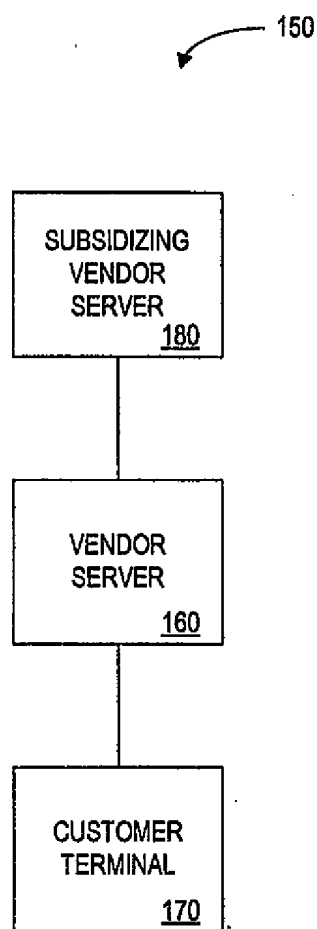


FIG. 1B

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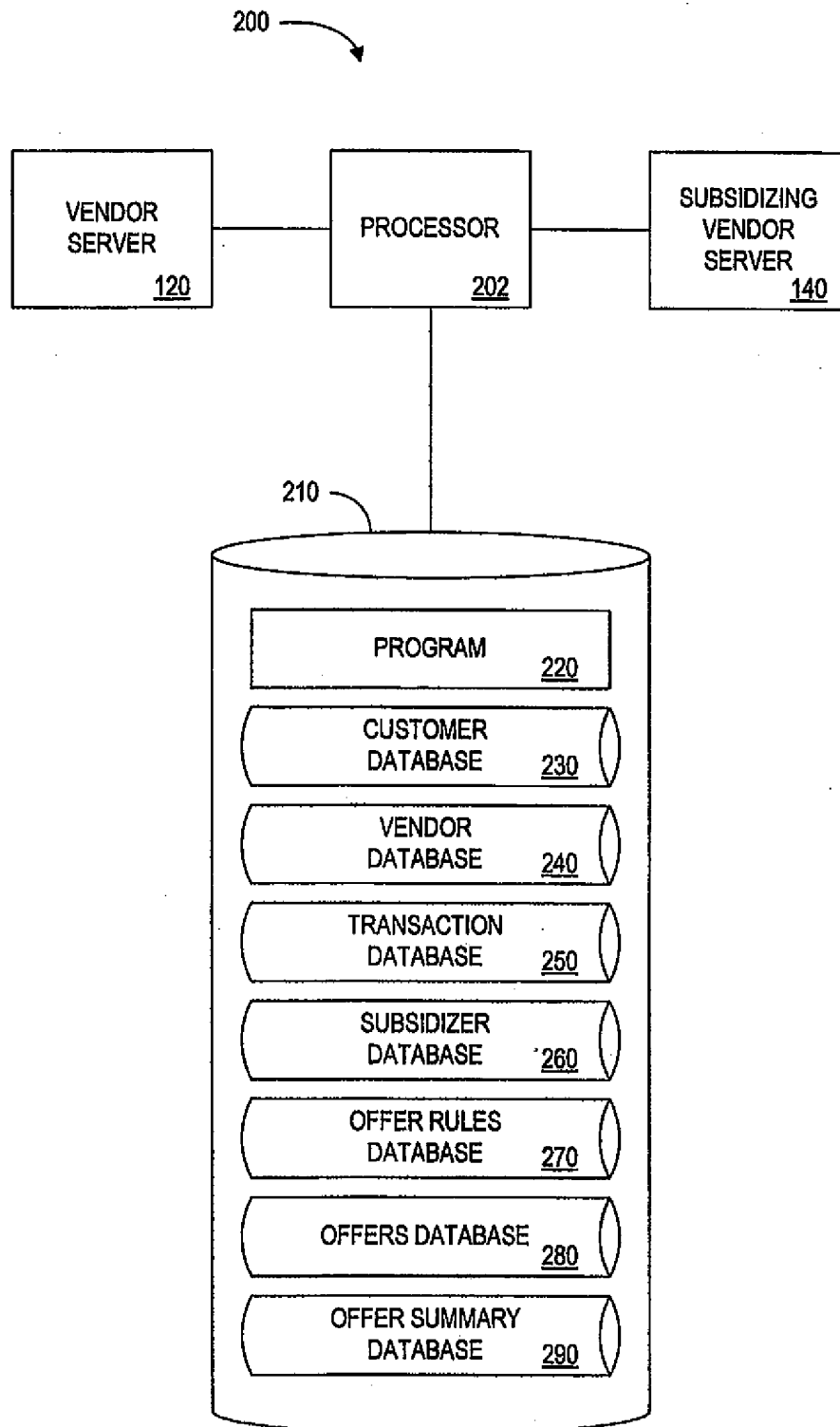


FIG. 2

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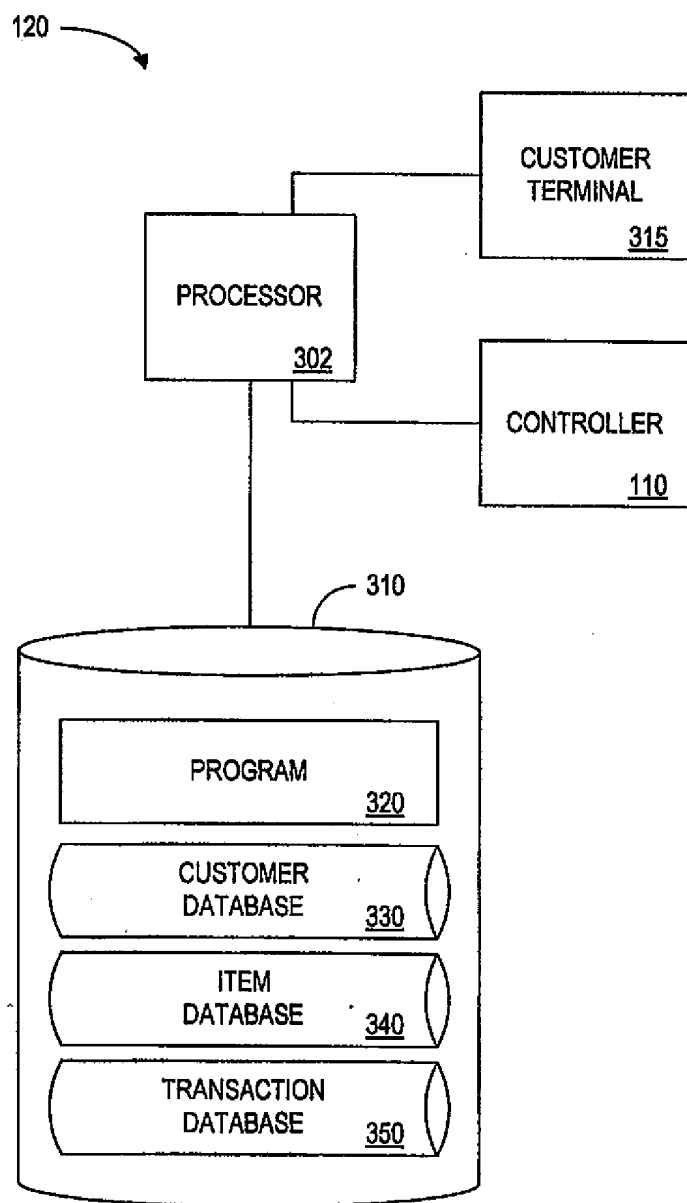


FIG. 3

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400

CUSTOMER IDENTIFIER 420	NAME 422	BILLING ADDRESS 424	CREDIT CARD INFORMATION 426	E-MAIL 428
C0001	DAN MANN	123 MAIN ST.	VISA 1111-1111-1111-1111	DMANN@ISP.COM
C0002	STEVE DAVIS	3 RIVERPLACE ROAD	AMEX 4444-5555-6666-3333	SDAVIS@SCHOOL.EDU
C0003	JEFF SMITH	2 THRUSH LANE	DIS 2222-3333-4444-7777	SMITH@WEBTV.COM
C0004	GEORGE ALAN	15 LAUREL AVENUE	VISA 1111-4444-8888-3333	ALAN@WORK.COM

FIG. 4

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500

VENDOR IDENTIFIER <u>520</u>	VENDOR NAME <u>522</u>	VENDOR E-MAIL ADDRESS <u>524</u>	AMOUNT OWED TO VENDOR <u>526</u>
V001	VENDOR X	X@X.COM	\$0.00
V002	VENDOR Y	Y@Y.COM	\$100.00
V003	VENDOR Z	Z@Z.COM	\$987.13
V004	VENDOR Q	Q@Q.COM	\$45.00

FIG. 5

600

TRANSACTION IDENTIFIER 620	TIME OF TRANSACTION 622	ITEMS ORDERED 624	CREDIT CARD INFORMATION 626	AMOUNT CHARGED 628	DELIVERY ADDRESS 630	CUSTOMER IDENTIFIER 632
T 000 001	1/4/2001 8:07 AM	P038, P049, P812	VISA 1111-1111- 1111-1111 EXP. 3/2002	\$49.87	123 MAIN ST. TOWN, USA	NONE
T 000 002	1/9/2001 9:00 PM	P123	MASTERCARD 2222-2222- 2222-2222 EXP. 9/2002	\$0.00	9876 PARK AVE. CITY, USA	C1234
T 000 003	1/10/2001 3:02 AM	P456, P789, P789	AMEX 9999-9999- 9999-9999 EXP. 4/2005	\$0.00	24 SHADY LA. TOWN, USA	C5678

602

604

606

FIG. 6

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700

<u>SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER</u> 720	<u>SUBSIDIZING VENDOR NAME</u> 722	<u>ACCOUNT</u> 724	<u>AMOUNT OWED BY SUBSIDIZING VENDOR</u> 726	<u>RANK</u> 728
S001	CREDIT CARD COMPANY X	BANK ACCOUNT #2345678	\$855.00	1
S002	LONG DISTANCE TELEPHONE Y	MC 1111-2222- 3333-4444	\$4,390.00	2
S003	SATELLITE TELEVISION Z	PREPAID BALANCE \$10,500	\$0	3

702
704
706

FIG. 7

800

OFFER RULE IDENTIFIER 820	SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER 822	CUSTOMER ACTIVITY 824	SUBSIDY AMOUNT 826	WHEN EFFECTIVE 828	ADDITIONAL TRANSACTION REQUIRED 830
R0001	S11	PUT ITEMS IN SHOPPING CART	UP TO \$50	ALWAYS	SIGN UP FOR CREDIT CARD ACCOUNT
R0002	S12	ACCESS WEB SITE 101	UP TO \$50	PURCHASING ITEM P004	SIGN UP FOR INTERNET ACCESS ACCOUNT
R0003	S12	ACCESS WEB SITE 102 FROM WEB SITE 103	\$40	CREDIT CARD = VISA AND TOTAL PRICE > \$100	SIGN UP FOR VISA PLUS ACCOUNT
R0004	213	READY TO PURCHASE AT LEAST \$100 OF ITEMS	\$100	CUSTOMER IS FROM A NEW ENGLAND STATE	SIGN UP FOR CELLULAR TELEPHONE SERVICE
R0005	S14	DOWNLOAD COUPONS FROM A RETAIL KIOSK	\$75	CUSTOMER DOES NOT HAVE CABLE TELEVISION FROM SERVICE PROVIDER	SIGN UP FOR CABLE TELEVISION

802 804 806 808 810

FIG. 8

900

OFFER IDENTIFIER 920	TRANSACTION IDENTIFIER 922	SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER 924	OFFER RULE APPLIED 926	WHEN OFFERED 928	EXPIRATION DATE 930	SUBSIDY AMOUNT 932	TOTAL PRICE 934	TOTAL PRICE WITH SUBSIDY 936	WHEN ACCEPTED 938
F001	T000000123	S111	R1230	8:15 AM 1/3/2001	-	\$50	\$97.12	\$47.12	8:15 AM 1/3/2001
F002	T000000456	S222	R4561	1:01 PM 1/4/2001	-	\$100	\$19.95	\$19.95	REJECTED
F003	T000000789	S345	R7892	3:09 PM 1/8/2001	11:59 PM 1/15/2001	\$10	\$10.00	\$0	11:10 AM 1/14/2001
F004	T000000109	S678	R0123	8:00 PM 1/12/2001	11:59 PM 1/22/2001	\$15	\$15.00	\$0	10:09 AM 1/20/2001
F005	T000000555	S901	R3454	12:35 AM 1/12/2001	11:59 PM 2/12/2001	\$75	\$48.00	\$0	OFFER STILL OPEN

902

904

906

908

910

FIG. 9

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1000

SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER: S888				1002
TOTAL NUMBER OF OFFERS: 1,794				1004
TOTAL NUMBER OF OFFERS ACCEPTED: 1,003				1006
TOTAL AMOUNT OF SUBSIDIES: \$52,800.00				1008
1010 1012	OFFER RULE IDENTIFIER 1020	NUMBER OF OFFERS 1022	NUMBER OF OFFERS ACCEPTED 1024	AMOUNT OF SUBSIDIES DUE 1026
	R1111	1004	500	\$2,500.00
	R2222	790	503	\$50,300.00

FIG. 10

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1100

1102

OFFER RULE IDENTIFIER R 3333			
CUSTOMER ACTIVITY 1120	NUMBER OF OFFERS 1122	NUMBER OF OFFERS ACCEPTED 1124	ACCEPTANCE RATE 1126
1104 PUT ITEMS IN SHOPPING CART	87	48	55%
1106 ACCESS WEB PAGE 9876	39	19	49%
1108 CLICK ON "PRODUCT INFORMATION" BUTTON	45	20	44%

FIG. 11

13 / 19

1200

ITEM IDENTIFIER 1220	ITEM DESCRIPTION 1222	ITEM PRICE 1224	AVAILABILITY 1226
P001	WAR AND PEACE	\$13.95	IN STOCK
P002	SUN TZU: THE ART OF WAR	\$15.95	AVAILABLE IN 2-3 DAYS

1202

1204

FIG. 12

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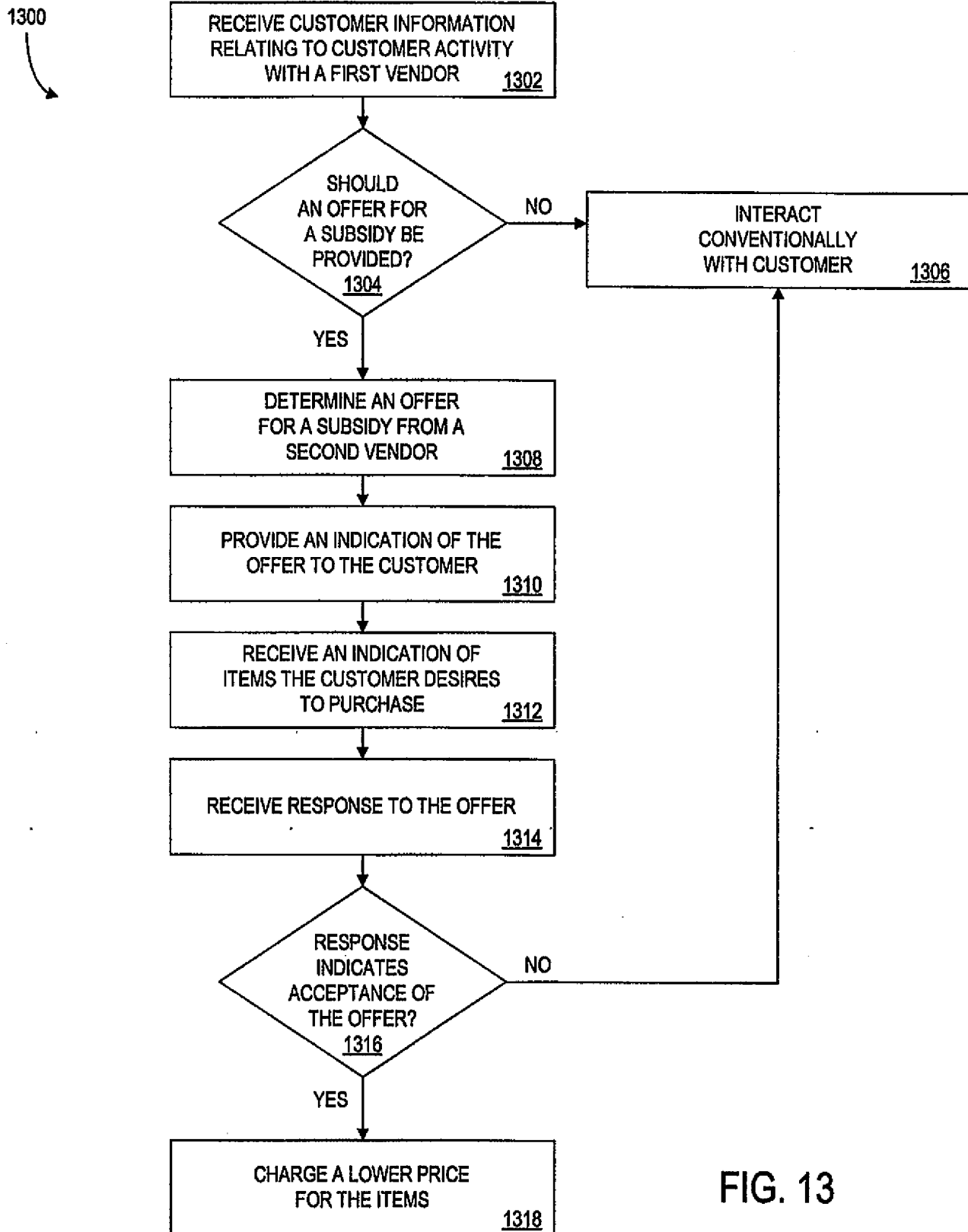


FIG. 13

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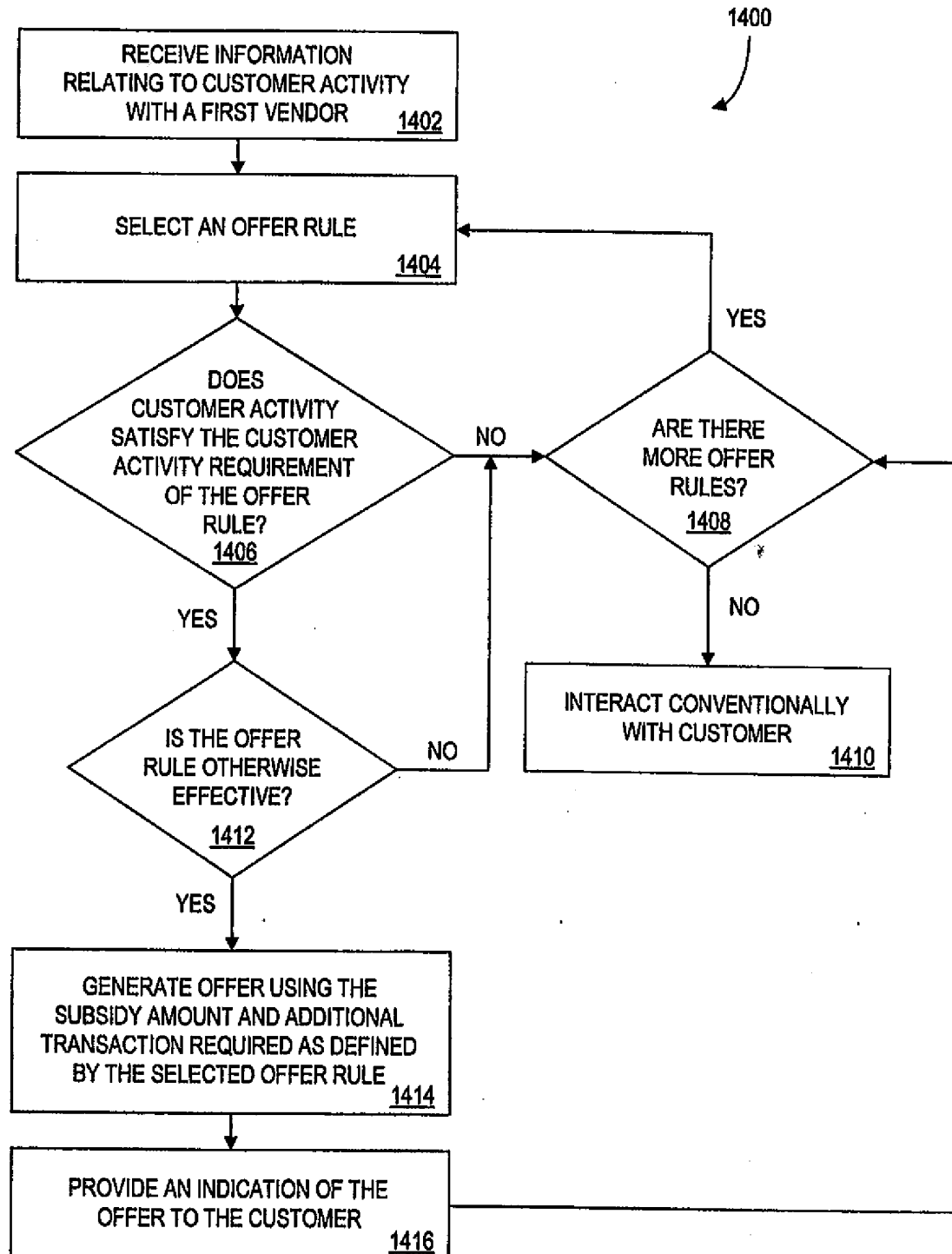


FIG. 14

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1500

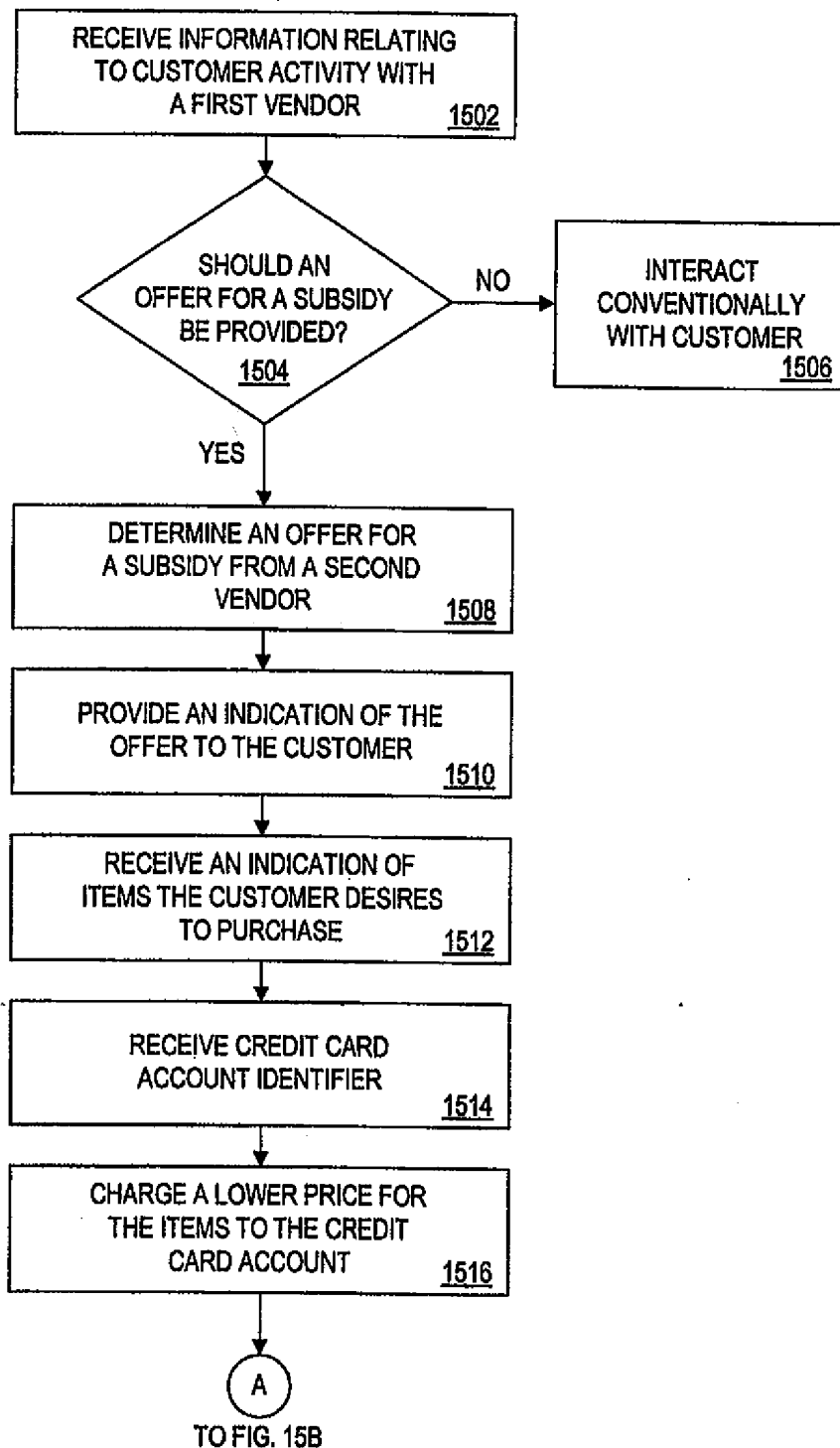


FIG. 15A

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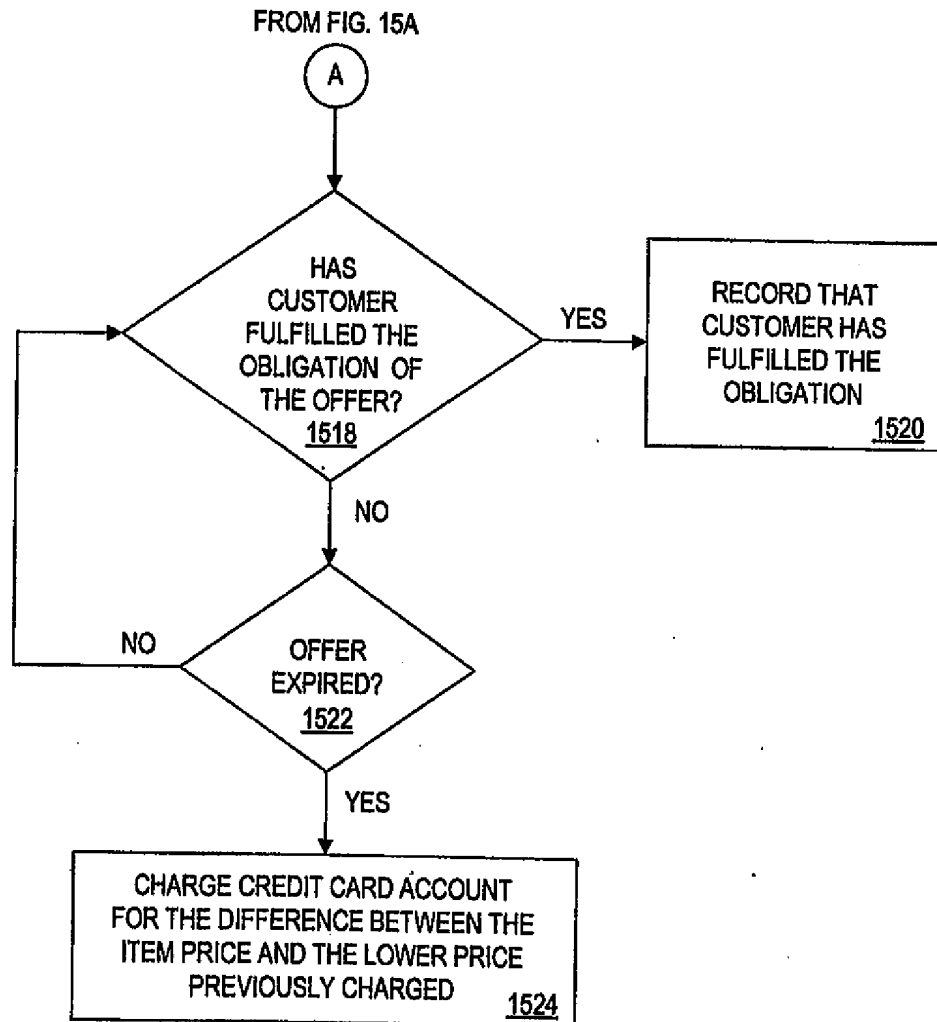


FIG. 15B

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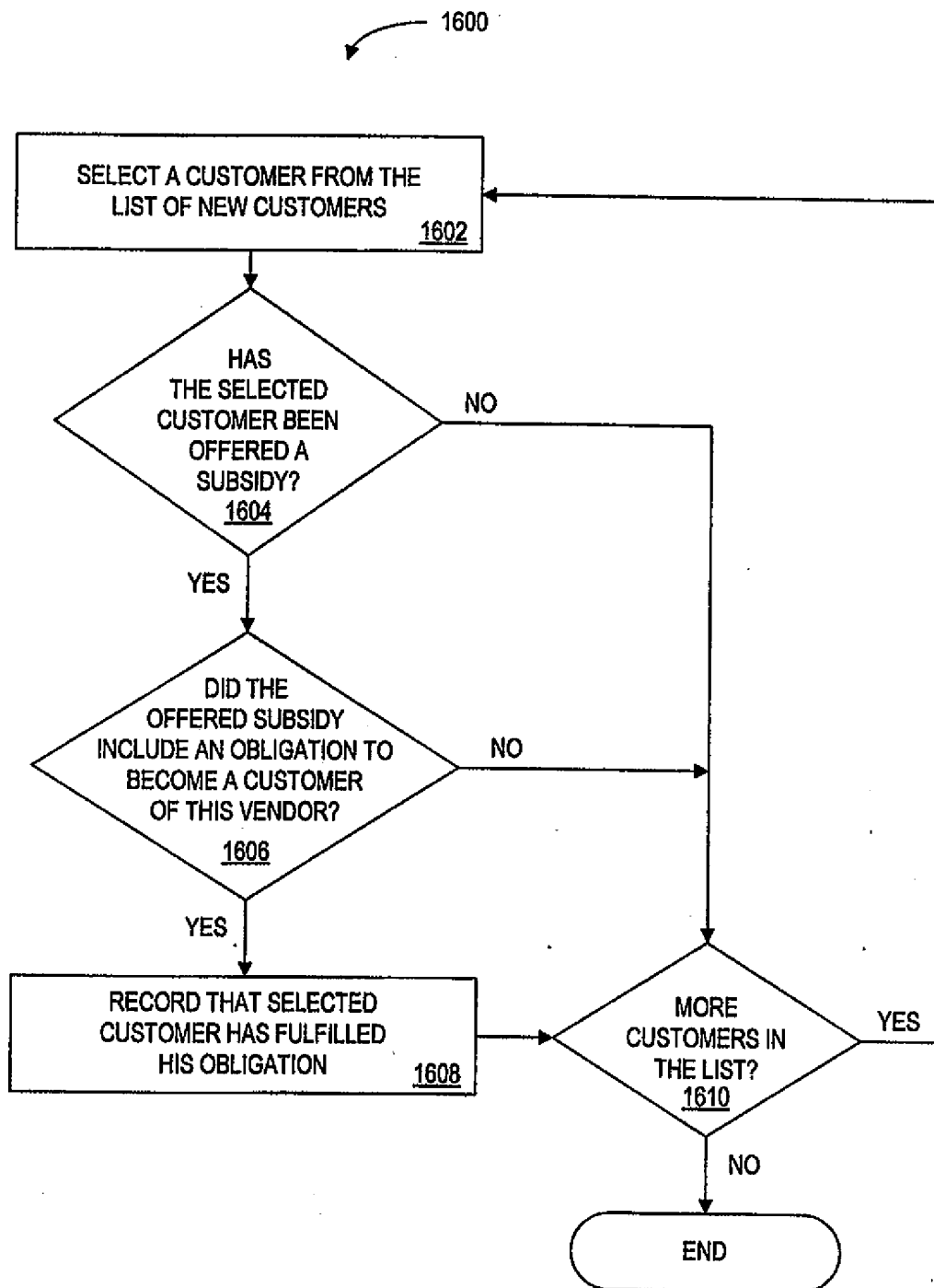


FIG. 16

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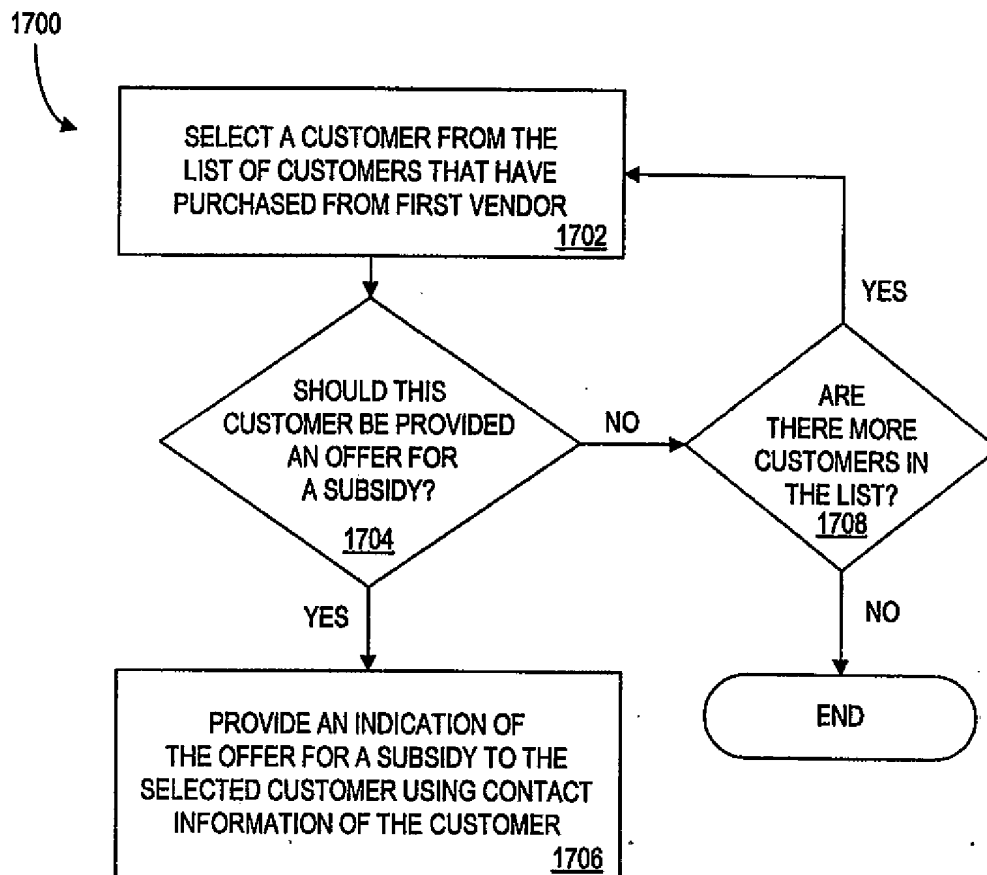


FIG. 17

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Intern: al Application No

PCT/US 99/19955

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC 7 G06F17/60

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC 7 G06F

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	WO 96 31848 A (BURDON DOUGLAS ; SMITH DEAN BENNETT (CA)) 10 October 1996 (1996-10-10) abstract; claims 1-4 page 7, line 1 -page 12, line 22	1-74
X	US 5 297 026 A (HOFFMAN FRANK) 22 March 1994 (1994-03-22) abstract; claims 1-8 column 1, line 64 -column 3, line 45	1-74
X	US 5 537 314 A (KANTER MARK W) 16 July 1996 (1996-07-16) abstract column 12, line 45 -column 17, line 22	1-74

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.☒ Patent family members are listed in annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

17 February 2000

Date of mailing of the international search report

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

Internat. Application No

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Patent document cited in search report		Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
WO 9631848	A	10-10-1996	CA 2142691 A	06-10-1996
			AU 5262996 A	23-10-1996
US 5297026	A	22-03-1994	AU 670775 B	01-08-1996
			AU 3424593 A	28-07-1993
			EP 0619902 A	19-10-1994
			FI 943172 A	01-07-1994
			NO 942501 A	31-08-1994
			WO 9313488 A	08-07-1993
US 5537314	A	16-07-1996	NONE	



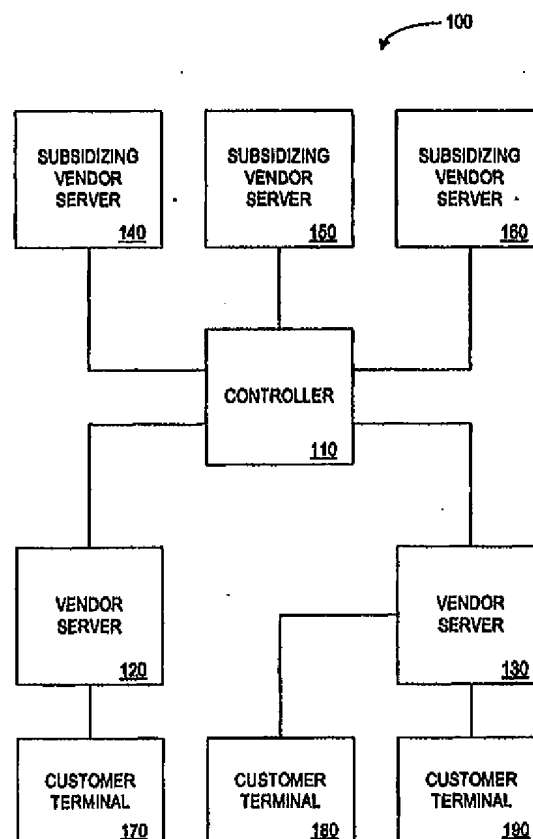
INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(51) International Patent Classification ⁶ : G06F 17/60, 17/00		A1	(11) International Publication Number: WO 99/66443
			(43) International Publication Date: 23 December 1999 (23.12.99)
(21) International Application Number: PCT/US99/13819		(74) Agents: ALDERUCCI, Dean et al.; Walker Digital Corporation, Intellectual Property Dept., One High Ridge Park, Stamford, CT 06905 (US).	
(22) International Filing Date: 18 June 1999 (18.06.99)			
(30) Priority Data: 09/100,684 19 June 1998 (19.06.98) US		(81) Designated States: AE, AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, CA, CH, CN, CU, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, NO, NZ, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, UA, UG, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW, ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, SD, SL, SZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).	
(71) Applicant: WALKER DIGITAL CORPORATION [US/US]; One High Ridge Park, Stamford, CT 06905-1324 (US).			
(72) Inventors: WALKER, Jay, S.; 124 Spectacle Lane, Ridgefield, CT 06877 (US). TEDESCO, Daniel, E.; Apartment 6, 192 Park Street, New Canaan, CT 06840 (US). TULLBY, Steven, C.; 15 River Place, Stamford, CT 06840 (US). PACKES, John, M., Jr.; Apartment 12P, 1435 Bedford Street, Stamford, CT 06905 (US). O'SHEA, Deirdre; Apartment 2A, 10 Manhattan Avenue, New York, NY 10025 (US). BEMER, Keith; Apartment 34B, 225 East 95th Street, New York, NY 10128 (US). JORASCH, James, A.; Apartment 5G, 25 Forest Street, Stamford, CT 06901 (US). ALDERUCCI, Dean, P.; 19-8 Prospect Ridge Road, Ridgefield, CT 06877 (US). MIK, Magdalena; 10 South New Street, Greenwich, CT 06830 (US).		Published <i>With international search report. Before the expiration of the time limit for amending the claims and to be republished in the event of the receipt of amendments.</i>	

(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS VIA A CENTRAL AUTHORITY

(57) Abstract

A controller (110) is in communication with a plurality of vendors (170, 180, 190) that are servicing customers, as well as with a plurality of "subsiding" vendors (140, 150, 160) seeking access to those customers. The controller (110) receives from a first vendor an indication of one or more items that a customer is to purchase. In response, the controller (110) transmits, on behalf of a subsidizing vendor (140, 150, 160), an indication of an offer for a subsidy such as a reduction in the customer's purchase price. If the customer accepts the offer, the controller (110) provides an amount of funds from the subsidizing vendor to the first vendor. The controller (110) also facilitates a transaction between the customer and the subsidizing vendor (140, 150, 160). For example, the customer may be required to sign up for a service (e.g. credit card account service) that is provided by the subsidizing vendor (140, 150, 160).



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**METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING
CROSS-BENEFITS VIA A CENTRAL AUTHORITY**

The present application is a continuation-in-part application of co-

5 pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND
APPARATUS FOR FACILITATING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH
PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS DURING A TRANSACTION" to Jay S. Walker
and Daniel E. Tedesco filed on December 23, 1998, which is a continuation-in-part
application of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/943,483 entitled

10 "SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR FACILITATING ACCEPTANCE OF
CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFERS (CPOs)" to Andrew S. Van Luchene, Daniel
E. Tedesco, James A. Jorasch, Jay S. Walker and Thomas M. Sparico filed on October
3, 1997, which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial
No. 08/923,683 entitled "CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFER (CPO)

15 MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR PACKAGES" to Andrew S. Van Luchene, Daniel E.
Tedesco, James A. Jorasch, Jay S. Walker and T. Scott Case filed September 4, 1997,
which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/889,319 entitled
"CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM" to Bruce

20 Schneier, James A. Jorasch, Jay S. Walker and T. Scott Case filed July 8, 1997, which
is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent No. 5,794,207 entitled "METHOD AND
APPARATUS FOR A CRYPTOGRAPHICALLY ASSISTED COMMERCIAL
NETWORK SYSTEM DESIGNED TO FACILITATE BUYER-DRIVEN
CONDITIONAL PURCHASE OFFERS" issued to Bruce Schneier, James A. Jorasch
and Jay S. Walker on August 11, 1998; and a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S.

25 patent application Serial No. 09/100,684 entitled "BILLING STATEMENT

CUSTOMER ACQUISITION SYSTEM” to Daniel E. Tedesco, James A. Jorasch and Jay S. Walker filed on June 19, 1998, which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/982,149 entitled “METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PRINTING A BILLING STATEMENT TO PROVIDE SUPPLEMENTARY

5 PRODUCT SALES” to Jay S. Walker, Daniel E. Tedesco, Andrew S. Van Luchene and Dean P. Alderucci filed on December 1, 1997; and a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/994,426 entitled “METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING SUPPLEMENTARY PRODUCT SALES TO A CUSTOMER AT A CUSTOMER TERMINAL” to Jay S. Walker, Andrew S. Van Luchene and Daniel

10 E. Tedesco filed on December 19, 1997, which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/920,116 entitled “METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR PROCESSING SUPPLEMENTARY PRODUCT SALES AT A POINT-OF-SALE TERMINAL” to Jay S. Walker, James A. Jorasch and Andrew S. Van Luchene

15 filed on August 26, 1997, which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Serial No. 08/822,709 entitled “SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR PERFORMING LOTTERY TICKET TRANSACTIONS UTILIZING POINT-OF-

SALE TERMINALS” to Jay S. Walker, James A. Jorasch and Sanjay K. Jindal filed on March 21, 1997, each of the foregoing applications incorporated herein by reference.

20 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and apparatus for facilitating commerce.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

There is a great deal of competition among vendors to attract and retain customers. Even when a customer has browsed a vendor's inventory, he will not make a purchase if an item's price is greater than the amount the customer is willing to pay.

5 One way to increase customer willingness to purchase is to provide discounts on items purchased. Unfortunately, vendors must use discounts sparingly, since reducing purchase prices likewise reduces margins and the reduced margins may not be offset by increased sales volume.

A vendor may also offer promotions to provide an incentive for
10 customers to make purchases. For example, a vendor may offer a "buy one get one free" promotion whereby a purchase of an item yields the benefit of an additional item at no cost. Similarly, a vendor may provide a discount on a purchase in exchange for signing up for a credit card account provided by the vendor.

Promotions may also be provided among two or more vendors. For
15 example, a first vendor may advertise that if a particular product is purchased, another product may be purchased from or given away by a second vendor.

The parent application of the present application, U.S. Patent
Application No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
FACILITATING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH PROVIDING CROSS-
20 BENEFITS DURING A TRANSACTION", filed on December 23, 1998, discloses a method and apparatus that permits a customer that is purchasing items from a first vendor to receive a benefit (e.g. a credit for the price of the items) from a second vendor. The present application provides further embodiments of this novel and beneficial invention.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a method and apparatus for facilitating commerce.

5 In accordance with the present invention, a controller is in communication with a plurality of vendors that are servicing customers, as well as with a plurality of "subsidizing" vendors seeking access to those customers. The controller receives from a first vendor server an indication of one or more items that a customer is to purchase. In response, the controller transmits, on behalf of a subsidizing vendor, an
10 indication of an offer for a subsidy such as a reduction in the customer's purchase price.

 If the customer accepts the offer, the controller provides, directly or indirectly, an amount of funds from the subsidizing vendor to the first vendor. The controller may retain a portion of the amount of funds as payment. The controller also facilitates a transaction between the customer and the subsidizing vendor. For example,
15 the customer may be required to sign up for a service (e.g. credit card account service) that is provided by the subsidizing vendor. The controller may facilitate this transaction by providing a form for entry of customer information.

 By having the controller manage such a system by acting between subsidizing vendors and vendors that are servicing customers, a vendor need only
20 communicate with the controller, rather than a plurality of other vendors. Vendors likewise need only form one relationship with a central authority rather than with a plurality of other vendors. Furthermore, as new subsidizing vendors elect to participate, existing vendors automatically benefit from the new subsidies which may be possible.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic illustration of an apparatus for facilitating commerce in accordance with the present invention.

5 FIG. 2 is a schematic illustration of a controller of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 is a schematic illustration of a vendor server of the apparatus of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is a representation of a customer database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 5 is a representation of a vendor database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 6 is a representation of a transaction database of the controller of FIG. 2.

10 FIG. 7 is a representation of a subsidizer database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 8 is a representation of an offer rules database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 9 is a representation of an offers database of the controller of FIG. 2.

FIG. 10 is a representation of a record of an offer summary database of the controller of FIG. 2.

15 FIG. 11 is a schematic illustration of an item database of the vendor server of FIG. 3.

FIG. 12 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method, performed by a vendor server, for providing an offer for a benefit.

20 FIG. 13 is a flow chart illustrating an embodiment of a method, performed by the controller of FIG. 2, for providing an offer for a benefit.

FIG. 14 is an exemplary web page.

FIG. 15 is another exemplary web page.

FIG. 16 is a flow diagram illustrating the transfer of funds among parties in accordance with the present invention.

FIGS. 17A and 17B are a flow chart illustrating another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer.

FIGS. 18A and 18B are a flow chart illustrating another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer.

5 FIG. 19 is a flow chart illustrating another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer.

FIGS. 20A and 20B are a flow chart illustrating another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer.

10 FIG. 21 is a table illustrating data used when a subsidy amount is applied over time.

FIG. 22 is a flow chart illustrating another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

15 Applicants have recognized that the acquisition budgets of various vendors may be advantageously used to facilitate commerce. A customer that purchases items from a first vendor may be paid, directly or indirectly, by a second vendor, so that the customer pays a reduced price, perhaps nothing at all, for his desired items. In exchange, the customer participates or agrees to participate in a transaction
20 with the second vendor. As used herein, this "transaction" may be any interaction with the second vendor. For example, the customer may be required to sign up for a service that is provided by the second vendor. Since many service providers are willing to pay significant amounts of money (e.g. often \$50 to \$200) to acquire a new customer, the ability to acquire a customer by essentially "intervening" in a sale between others can

benefit all parties involved. The customer is benefited by the reduced price of his items, the first vendor is benefited by the increased sales and customer satisfaction that such an arrangement would bring, and the second vendor is benefited by the additional transaction, particularly the acquisition of a new customer in one embodiment.

5 In addition, applicants have also recognized that there are benefits to having a controller manage such a system by acting between subsidizing vendors and vendors that are servicing customers. For example, a vendor need only communicate with the controller, rather than with a plurality of other vendors. Vendors likewise need only form one relationship with a central authority rather than with a plurality of other
10 vendors. Furthermore, as new subsidizing vendors elect to participate, existing vendors automatically benefit from the new subsidies which may be possible.

 The controller of the present invention can also track customer information derived from several vendors, allowing subsidies to be better targeted to customers. The controller can also act to reduce or eliminate customer manipulation of
15 subsidy offers. For example, the controller can identify a customer that attempts to merely collect subsidies by agreeing to participate in contradictory transactions, such as simultaneously agreeing to switch to two telephone service providers.

 Referring to FIG. 1, an apparatus 100 includes a controller 110 that is in communication with vendor servers 120 and 130. The controller 110 and the vendor
20 servers 120 and 130 may comprise computers, such as those based on an Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that are adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Any number of vendor servers may be in communication with the controller 110.

Each of the vendor servers 120 and 130 may be a "web server" of a vendor (e.g. a retail seller). A vendor server could then generate a web page that may be accessed via the World Wide Web and allow purchases from the vendor to be made in a manner known in the art. Alternatively, each of the vendor servers 120 and 130
5 may be a computer involved in operating a physical store. Such a computer, for example a point of sale (POS) server, would perform such tasks as inventory management and item pricing.

The controller 110 is also in communication with subsidizing vendor servers 140, 150 and 160. Each of the subsidizing vendor servers 140, 150 and 160
10 may comprise computers, such as those based on the Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that are adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Any number of subsidizing vendor servers may be in communication with the controller 110.

Each of the subsidizing vendor servers 140, 150 and 160 may be a "web
15 server" of a vendor. A subsidizing vendor server could then generate a web page that may be accessed via the World Wide Web and allow transactions with the subsidizing vendor in a manner known in the art. Alternatively, each of the subsidizing vendor servers 140, 150 and 160 may be a computer involved in operating a physical store. Such a computer would perform such tasks as inventory management and item pricing.

20 A vendor server may be in communication with one or more customer terminals that transmit data on a customer transaction (e.g. a purchase). The vendor server 120 is in communication with a customer terminal 170, and the vendor server 130 is in communication with customer terminals 180 and 190. Any or all of the customer terminals 170, 180 and 190 may be point of sale (POS) terminals, such as the

NCR 7454 manufactured by NCR Corporation or the IBM 4683 manufactured by International Business Machines. As is known in the art, POS terminals perform such processes as calculating the total price of a purchase (goods or services) and calculating the amount of change due to a customer. POS terminals may furthermore track purchases made and adjust databases of inventory accordingly.

In another embodiment, any or all of the customer terminals 170, 180 and 190 may be computers, such as those based on the Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, that are adapted to communicate via the Internet (e.g. via a modem) or other medium. Such computers are able to appropriately access a web page to communicate with a vendor server in a manner that is known to those skilled in the art.

In still other embodiments, any or all of the customer terminals 170, 180 and 190 may be telephones, vending machines, other devices that can receive payment from customers in exchange for providing goods or services, pagers or palmtop computers such as personal digital assistants (PDAs).

Referring to FIG. 2, the controller 110 comprises a processor 200, such as the Intel® Pentium® microprocessor. The processor 200 is in communication with a data storage device 210, such as an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical and/or semiconductor memory. For example, the data storage device 210 may comprise one or more of a ROM, RAM and hard disk. The processor 200 and the data storage device 210 may each be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication medium, such as a serial port cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof. In one embodiment, the controller 110 may comprise one or more computers that are connected to a remote server computer for maintaining databases.

The data storage device 210 stores a program 220 for controlling the processor 200. The processor 200 performs instructions of the program 220, and thereby operates in accordance with the present invention, and particularly in accordance with the methods described in detail herein. The program 220 furthermore
5 includes program elements that may be necessary, such as an operating system and "device drivers" for allowing the processor 200 to interface with computer peripheral devices. Appropriate device drivers and other necessary program elements are known to those skilled in the art, and need not be described in detail herein.

The storage device 210 also stores (i) a customer database 230, (ii) a
10 vendor database 240, (iii) a transaction database 250, (iv) a subsidizer database 260, (v) an offer rules database 270, (vi) an offers database 280 and (vii) an offer summary database 290. The databases 230, 240, 250, 260, 270, 280 and 290 are described in detail below and depicted with exemplary entries in the accompanying figures. As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the schematic illustrations and accompanying
15 descriptions of the databases presented herein are exemplary arrangements for stored representations of information. A number of other arrangements may be employed besides those suggested by the tables shown. Similarly, the illustrated entries of the databases represent exemplary information, and those skilled in the art will understand that the number and content of the entries can be different from those illustrated herein.

20 Referring to FIG. 3, a vendor server 300 is illustrative of the vendor servers 120 and 130 (FIG. 1). The vendor server comprises a processor 302, such as the Intel® Pentium® microprocessor, which is in communication with a customer terminal 315 and the controller 110. The processor 302 is also in communication with a data storage device 310, such as an appropriate combination of magnetic, optical

and/or semiconductor memory. For example, the data storage device 310 may comprise one or more of a ROM, RAM and hard disk. The processor 302 and the data storage device 310 may each be (i) located entirely within a single computer or other computing device; (ii) connected to each other by a remote communication medium, such as a serial port cable, telephone line or radio frequency transceiver; or (iii) a combination thereof. In one embodiment, the vendor server 300 may comprise one or more computers that are connected to a remote server computer for maintaining databases.

The data storage device 310 stores a program 320 for controlling the processor 302. The processor 302 performs instructions of the program 320, and thereby operates in accordance with the present invention, and particularly in accordance with the methods described in detail herein. The program 320 furthermore includes program elements that may be necessary, such as an operating system and "device drivers" for allowing the processor 302 to interface with computer peripheral devices. Appropriate device drivers and other necessary program elements are known to those skilled in the art, and need not be described in detail herein.

The storage device 310 also stores (i) a customer database 330, (ii) an item database 340, and (iii) a transaction database 350. The customer database 330 and the transaction database 350 of the vendor server 300 may be similar or identical to the customer database 230 and transaction database 250 of the controller 110. For example, the controller 110 may store data that is derived from the vendor server 300, and vice versa. If each vendor server stores data on its own customers and its own transactions, the controller 110 could aggregate this data from each vendor server.

The databases 330, 340 and 350 are described in detail below and depicted with exemplary entries in the accompanying figures. As will be understood by those skilled in the art, the schematic illustrations and accompanying descriptions of the databases presented herein are exemplary arrangements for stored representations of information. A number of other arrangements may be employed besides those suggested by the tables shown. Similarly, the illustrated entries of the databases represent exemplary information, and those skilled in the art will understand that the number and content of the entries can be different from those illustrated herein.

Referring to FIG. 4, a table 400 represents an embodiment of the customer database 230 (FIG. 2) and/or the customer database 330 (FIG. 3). The table 400 includes entries 402, 404, 406 and 408, each defining a customer that may purchase items from a vendor. Such information may be determined, for example, when a customer registers for a frequent shopper card. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 400 may include any number of entries. The table 400 also defines fields for each of the entries 402, 404, 406 and 408. The fields specify (i) a customer identifier 420 that uniquely identifies the customer, (ii) a name 422 of the customer, (iii) a billing address 424 of the customer, (iv) credit card information 426 which may be used to render payment in purchasing the items, and (v) an electronic mail ("email") address 428 for communication with the customer.

Referring to FIG. 5, a table 500 represents an embodiment of the vendor database 240 (FIG. 2). The table 500 includes entries 502, 504, 506 and 508, each defining a vendor that services customers and may have those customers receive offers for subsidies. Such information may be determined when a vendor registers for participation in the subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will

understand that the table 500 may include any number of entries. The table 500 also defines fields for each of the entries 502, 504, 506 and 508. The fields specify (i) a vendor identifier 520 that uniquely identifies the vendor, (ii) a vendor name 522, (iii) a vendor email address 524 for communication with the vendor, and (iv) an amount owed
5 526 to the vendor (e.g. promised but unpaid subsidy amounts).

Referring to FIG. 6, a table 600 represents an embodiment of the transaction database 250 (FIG. 2) and/or the transaction database 350 (FIG. 3). The table 600 includes entries 602, 604 and 606, each defining a transaction with a vendor server. Typically, the transaction includes a purchase of items by a customer. Those
10 skilled in the art will understand that the table 600 may include any number of entries. The table 600 also defines fields for each of the entries 602, 604 and 606. The fields specify (i) a transaction identifier 620 that uniquely identifies the transaction, (ii) a time 622 of the transaction, (iii) the items ordered 624, (iv) credit card information 626 that may define a credit card account that was charged to pay for the items purchased, (v) an
15 amount charged 628 for the items, (vi) a delivery address 630 for the items, and (vii) a customer identifier 632 (if any) that identifies the customer that made the purchase. Other forms of payment may be used besides a credit card account. For example, debit accounts or "electronic cash" may be used to render payment.

Referring to FIG. 7, a table 700 represents an embodiment of the
20 subsidizer database 260 (FIG. 2). The table 700 includes entries 702, 704 and 706, each defining a subsidizing vendor that may subsidize purchases. Such information may be determined when a subsidizing vendor registers for participation in the subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 700 may include any number of entries. The table 700 also defines fields for each

of the entries 702, 704 and 706. The fields specify (i) a subsidizing vendor identifier 720 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (ii) a name 722 of the subsidizing vendor, (iii) an account 724 used to pay for the subsidies, (iv) an amount owed 726 by the subsidizing vendor, and (v) a rank 728 used to prioritize subsidizing vendors and/or subsidies from those subsidizing vendors. The ranks may be established periodically (e.g. once per year) or substantially continuously based on various criteria. For example, the ranks may be adjusted dynamically based on the acceptance rates of offers from the subsidizing vendors and/or amount of funds the subsidizing vendors have provided in connection with their offers.

Referring to FIG. 8, a table 800 represents an embodiment of the offer rules database 270 (FIG. 2). The table 800 includes entries 802, 804, 806, 808 and 810, each defining an offer rule. When an offer rule is satisfied during a transaction, the vendor provides an offer for a specified benefit, such as a subsidy. Such information may be determined when a subsidizing vendor registers for participation in the subsidizing program described herein. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 800 may include any number of entries. The table 800 also defines fields for each of the entries 802, 804, 806, 808 and 810. The fields specify (i) an offer rule identifier 820 that uniquely identifies the offer rule, (ii) a subsidizing vendor identifier 822 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (iii) a subsidy amount 824, (iv) when the offer rule is effective 826 (i.e. when the offer rule is satisfied), and (v) an additional transaction 828 that is required of the customer in exchange for the subsidy. As described below, several types of transactions, such as additional purchases or initiating service agreements, may be required of the customer.

Referring to FIG. 9, a table 900 represents an embodiment of the offers database 280 (FIG. 2). The table 900 includes entries 902, 904, 906, 908 and 910, each defining an offer for a subsidy. The offer was provided to a customer during a transaction of the customer with the vendor. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 900 may include any number of entries. The table 900 also defines fields for each of the entries 902, 904, 906, 908 and 910. The fields specify (i) an offer identifier 920 that uniquely identifies the offer, (ii) a transaction identifier 922 that uniquely identifies the transaction during which the offer was provided, (iii) a subsidizing vendor identifier 924 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, (iv) an identifier of an offer rule 926 that was applied during the transaction, (v) a subsidy amount 928, (vi) a total price 930 that the customer would have to pay without the subsidy, (vii) a total price 932 that the customer would have to pay with the subsidy, and (viii) whether the offer was accepted 934. As described above with reference to FIG. 8, offer rules define specific subsidies. Thus, the identifier of an offer rule stored in field 926 may be used to determine a corresponding subsidy amount.

Referring to FIG. 10, a table 1000 represents a record of an embodiment of the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2). The offer summary database 290 typically includes a plurality of records, each defining a summary of offers for subsidies that have been provided on behalf of a subsidizing vendor. The table 1000 includes a subsidizing vendor identifier 1002 that uniquely identifies the subsidizing vendor, a total number of offers provided 1004 on behalf of the subsidizing vendor, a total number of those offers that were accepted 1006, and a total amount 1008 of the subsidies due in connection with accepted offers.

The table 1000 also includes entries 1010 and 1012, each defining offers provided due to satisfaction of an offer rule of the subsidizing vendor. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table 1000 may include any number of entries. The table 1000 also defines fields for each of the entries 1010 and 1012. The fields specify

5 (i) an offer rule identifier 1020 that uniquely identifies the offer rule, (ii) a number 1022 of offers provided due to the offer rule, (iii) a number 1024 of these offers that were accepted, (iv) an amount 1026 of the subsidies due in connection with these accepted offers. If desirable, the information stored in the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2) may be organized by the vendor through which the offer was provided. Such an

10 embodiment would allow a comparison of the acceptance rate (number of offers accepted / number of offers provided) of offers at different vendors.

Referring to FIG. 11, a table 1100 represents an embodiment of the item database 340 (FIG. 3). The table 1100 includes entries 1102 and 1104, each defining an item sold via a vendor server. Those skilled in the art will understand that the table

15 1100 may include any number of entries. The table 1100 also defines fields for each of the entries 1102 and 1104. The fields specify (i) a item identifier 1120 that uniquely identifies the item, (ii) an item description 1122, (iii) an item price 1124 for which the item is typically sold, and (iv) an availability 1126 of the item which may be based on an inventory level of the item.

20 Referring to FIG. 12, a flow chart 1200 illustrates an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit (e.g. a reduced price) to a customer that is to purchase items from a vendor. In one embodiment, the illustrated method is performed by a vendor server after the customer has accessed a web page generated and/or controlled by the vendor server. In another embodiment, the illustrated method is

performed by a vendor server after a customer brings items he wishes to purchase to a POS terminal.

The vendor server receives an indication that the customer is to purchase items from the web site of the vendor (step 1202). For example, after a customer

5 accesses a web site of the vendor, the customer may select one or more items to purchase, and "click" a button that indicates that the customer desires to purchase the selected items. The act of clicking could generate a signal that the vendor server interprets as an indication that the customer is to purchase the selected items. In another embodiment, the act of accessing the web site could generate a signal that the
10 vendor server interprets as an indication that the customer is to purchase the selected items. In yet another embodiment, a bar code scanner reads bar codes on items the customer brings to a POS terminal. The bar code scanner then generates a signal that the vendor server interprets as an indication that the customer is to purchase the selected items. The item database 340 (FIG. 3) would provide relevant details about
15 each indicated item. Those skilled in the art will understand still other types of appropriate indications.

The vendor server then transmits the indication of the items to the controller 110 (step 1204). In response, the controller transmits and the vendor server receives an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a subsidizing vendor (step 1206).

20 This indication may include an indication of a subsidy amount. For example, referring again to FIG. 8, the field 824 specifies a subsidy amount for an offer rule, and such data could be included in the indication of an offer for a subsidy. The indication may also include an indication of a transaction the customer is required to perform in exchange

for receiving the subsidy amount. The field 828 (FIG. 8) specifies such a required transaction.

The vendor server provides the customer with an offer for the subsidy (step 1208). For example, the POS terminal may display a textual representation of the offer, which is read by the customer or read to the customer by a cashier. In another embodiment, the web page may display text describing the subsidy. The web page may be dynamically modified to include a button that, when clicked, indicates acceptance of an offer for a subsidy. Alternatively, the offer may be transmitted to the customer via email, telephone or other means.

A response to the offer is received (step 1210). For example, the customer or cashier may actuate a button that generates a representative signal for the POS terminal. In another embodiment, the customer may click a button on the web page or click on a hyperlink on the web page. If it is determined that the offer is not accepted (step 1212), then the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1214). For example, the items are to be purchased for the conventional total price, a credit card number is received and the corresponding credit card account is charged appropriately.

If it is determined that the offer is accepted (step 1212), then an indication of the acceptance is transmitted to the controller 110 (step 1216) and the customer is charged a reduced price for the items (step 1218). Charging a reduced price may comprise charging the conventional (i.e. unreduced) price followed by crediting the customer a discount amount. For example, if the items are normally sold for \$25 (as determined by prices specified by the item database 340), then \$25 is charged to a credit card account of the customer, and a discount amount (perhaps \$25 as well) is credited to the credit card account.

Referring to FIG. 13, a flow chart 1300 illustrates an embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer. In one embodiment, the controller 110 (FIG. 1) performs the illustrated method after the customer has accessed a web page generated and/or controlled by the vendor server. In another embodiment, the controller 110 performs the illustrated method after a customer brings items he wishes to purchase to a POS terminal.

The controller 110 receives an indication that the customer is to purchase items from a first vendor (step 1302). For example, a customer may bring items to purchase to a POS terminal, at which point the items are scanned by a bar code scanner. The POS terminal in turn transmits an indication of the items to the vendor server, which in turn transmits the indication to the controller 110 (step 1204 of FIG. 12), which receives the indication. In another embodiment, after the customer accesses a web site, the customer may select one or more items to purchase, and "click" a button that indicates that the customer desires to purchase the selected items. The act of clicking could generate a signal that is transmitted via the vendor server to the controller 110. Alternatively, the customer terminal may include "client-side" software that detects various types of customer activity and in response generates signals and transmits the signals via the vendor server to the controller 110. The controller 110 interprets the signal as an indication that the customer is to purchase the selected items. In another embodiment, the act of accessing the web site could generate a signal that the controller 110 interprets as an indication that the customer is to purchase the selected items. Those skilled in the art will understand still other types of appropriate indications.

In response to the indication that the customer is to purchase items from the first vendor, the controller 110 transmits to the vendor server an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor (step 1304). The controller 110 may then create an entry in the offers database 280 (FIG. 2) to record the offer. In particular, the
5 total price with subsidy may be calculated by subtracting the subsidy amount from the total price of the items. The controller 110 may also create an appropriate record of the offer summary database 290 (FIG. 2). The controller 110 subsequently receives an indication of the customer response (step 1306) from the vendor server. This response is also recorded in the appropriate entry of the offers database 280. If the customer did
10 not accept the offer (step 1308), the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1310).

If the customer accepted the offer, the controller 110 provides funds to the first vendor (step 1312). As described below, the funds provided to the first vendor may equal or exceed the amount of reduction in price of the customer's purchase. The controller 110 may provide funds a short time after the offer is accepted (e.g.
15 substantially immediately). Alternatively, the controller 110 may provide funds periodically (e.g. in accordance with a periodic remittance cycle). For example, the controller 110 may maintain a running balance of funds owed to various vendors. At the end of the month, the controller would transmit the aggregate amount to the appropriate vendor or vendors. The step of providing funds may comprise crediting an
20 account corresponding to the first vendor. Alternatively, providing funds may comprise initiating a transfer of funds (e.g. a "wire transfer") to an account corresponding to the first vendor.

In another embodiment described in the parent application, U.S. Patent Application No. 09/219,267 entitled "METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR

FACILITATING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE THROUGH PROVIDING CROSS-BENEFITS DURING A TRANSACTION", filed on December 23, 1998, the controller 110 provides funds to the customer by crediting an account of the customer.

In exchange for the subsidy, the customer is obligated to participate in a transaction with the second vendor. Accordingly, the controller 110 facilitates the required transaction between the customer and the second vendor (step 1314). For example, the controller 110 may provide, directly or indirectly, a form for the customer to complete. In another embodiment, the controller 110 may initiate the transfer of information about the customer (e.g. a service provider of the customer) to the second vendor. The controller may record each interaction with a customer in the transaction database 250 (FIG. 2).

Referring to FIG. 14, an exemplary web page 1400 illustrates a possible means for providing an offer for a benefit and receiving an acceptance of the offer. The web page 1400 illustrates an embodiment in which the vendor sells books via the World Wide Web. A book that the customer is ready to purchase is indicated by text 1402, and a quantity of that book (one book in FIG. 14) is indicated by text 1404. A price of the books is indicated by text 1406, and similarly a total price (e.g. the sum of item prices and any other prices) due from the customer is indicated by text 1408.

A button 1410 is clicked by the customer if the customer desires to purchase the specified items and thereby consummate the purchase. Upon clicking the button 1410, the items may be immediately deemed as having been purchased by the customer. A button 1412 is clicked by the customer if the customer desires to accept an offer for a subsidy. Alternatively, actuating the button 1412 may indicate that the

customer is interested in further information regarding an offer for a subsidy, and the customer may subsequently indicate whether he accepts the offer.

Referring to FIG. 15, a second exemplary web page 1500 allows the customer to provide customer information via a form having fields 1502 that receive entered text. The customer information is used in applying for a credit card account with a credit card issuer. In one embodiment, the web page 1500 may be displayed after the customer clicks the button 1412 of FIG. 14. Information that is entered via the web page 1500 may be transmitted to the controller 110 upon actuation of a button 1504. Actuation of the button 1504 may furthermore indicate acceptance of the offer for the subsidy. For example, actuation of the button 1504 may indicate a willingness to apply for a credit card account, or that the customer has applied for the credit card account. Conversely, actuation of the button 1506 may indicate rejection of the offer for the subsidy.

Referring to FIG. 16, a flow diagram 1600 illustrates the transfer of funds among parties in accordance with the present invention. A subsidizing vendor 1610 provides an amount 1615 of \$50 to a central service 1620 (i.e. the entity that controls or operates the controller 110). The central service 1620 in turn provides an amount 1625 of \$45 to a vendor 1630. The vendor 1630 in turn provides an amount 1635 of \$42 to its customer 1640. In the illustrated flow diagram 1600, the central service 1620 and the vendor 1630 each retain a portion of the funds received from the subsidizing vendor 1610. In particular, the central service 1620 retains \$5 ($\$5 = \$50 - \45) and the vendor 1630 retains \$3 ($\$3 = \$45 - \42). The difference between the funds received by a party ("funds in") and the funds provided by a party ("funds out") in connection with a subsidy may depend on various criteria. In one embodiment, the

funds out are a predetermined amount less than the funds in. For example, the central service 1620 may deduct \$5 from each amount provided by the subsidizing vendor 1610. In another embodiment, the funds out are a predetermined percentage of the funds in. For example, the vendor 1630 may deduct 5% of the funds in, and thus the funds out from the vendor would be 95% of the funds in to the vendor. Those skilled in the art will realize still other ways to calculate the difference between the funds received by a party and the funds provided by a party in connection with a subsidy.

The amount of funds that are retained by the vendor 1630 may be based on the amount provided by the subsidizing vendor 1610 and the purchase price of the customer 1640. For example, if the subsidizing vendor 1610 is willing to provide \$50, yet the customer's purchase price is only \$20, the difference of \$30 ($\$30 = \$50 - \$20$) may be retained by the central service 1620 and/or the vendor 1630. The \$30 may be allocated among the two parties 1620 and 1630 in numerous manners. For example, one party may retain a fixed amount (e.g. \$5) and the other party retains the remainder.

In one embodiment, the central service 1620 retains the excess between the purchase price of the customer and the amount provided by the subsidizing vendor. This amount may be used to augment other offers for subsidies. For example, if a subsidizing vendor is willing to provide \$50 per customer, and a first customer's purchase price is only \$20, then the difference of \$30 may be retained by the subsidizing vendor. A second customer having a purchase price of \$80 could then receive his items for free, since the subsidy of \$50 together with the retained \$30 can offset the \$80 purchase price.

Similarly, the amounts retained from numerous transactions may be used to offset other purchase prices. The amounts retained may be collected into a "pool" of

funds with which to increase specific subsidy amounts, e.g., subsidy amounts for purchase prices which exceed a base subsidy amount. Furthermore, historical data on past transactions can permit efficient selection of future transactions that should receive "augmented" subsidy amounts from the pool of funds. For example, historical data can

5 indicate the average transaction amount expected, as well as the expected number of subsequent transactions that will be in a predetermined range of prices. Thus, the most efficient allocation of the pool of funds among future transactions may be determined a priori.

Referring to FIGS. 17A and 17B, a flow chart 1700 illustrates another

10 embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to purchase items from a vendor. The controller 110 receives an indication that the customer is ready to purchase items from the web site of a first vendor (step 1702). A customer may indicate his readiness to purchase by, for example, selecting items to purchase and actuating a specific button that consummates the purchase of the items.

15 Before the customer purchases the items, the controller 110 transmits to the vendor server an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor (step 1704). Subsequently, a response from the customer is received (step 1706) via the vendor server. For example, the customer may verbally indicate his response to a cashier, the cashier actuates a corresponding button on his POS terminal, and the POS terminal

20 transmits a signal representing the response to the vendor server.

If it is determined that the offer is not accepted (step 1708), then the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1710). If however it is determined that the offer is accepted (step 1708), then customer information is received (step 1712).

Such customer information may be used in providing or facilitating an additional transaction that is required of the customer in exchange for the subsidy.

In one embodiment described in further detail below, in exchange for the subsidy the customer agrees to initiate a new service agreement, so that a service is
5 provided by the second vendor. Accordingly, the customer information may comprise an indication of a service that is provided to the customer (e.g. whether the customer has cable television service), or a service provider that provides a service to the customer (e.g. which company provides cable television service to the customer). The additional transaction may occur after a significant amount of time has elapsed.
10 Accordingly, in one embodiment there is a means for determining if the future action has occurred.

Furthermore, a penalty may be assessed against the customer if the customer does not perform the required additional transaction. For example, the subsidy to the customer may be canceled and the transaction may then be processed
15 conventionally. Alternatively, a penalty fee may be charged to the customer.

Similarly, a penalty could be assessed if another imposed condition is violated. For example, a penalty could be assessed if the items are purchased and then returned. Similarly, a returnable purchase could be made a non-returnable purchase in exchange for the subsidy or other benefit. Still another penalty would be to prevent the
20 customer from receiving subsidies from any merchant in the future. Such "blacklisting" could be readily administered by the central controller 110, which can store, for each customer, an indication of whether the customer has been blacklisted and subsequently identify customers that have been blacklisted.

The customer information may be received from the customer. In one embodiment, the controller 110 can send a request via the vendor server that the customer provide customer information. For example, the controller 110 may transmit a form (e.g. via a web site) including questions to be answered. In response, the vendor server would receive answers to the questions, and these answers would constitute the customer information from the customer.

In another embodiment, the customer information may be received from a party other than the customer. For example, information regarding the customer may be received from a third-party database (e.g. a list of addresses to provide a location of the customer, a credit reporting agency). Alternatively, customer information may be received from an ISP (Internet Service Provider), which can provide information such as an Internet address (e.g. email address or IP address) of the customer.

In still another embodiment, the customer information may be received via a "cookie" stored on a customer terminal (e.g. a computer of the customer). Those skilled in the art will understand that a great variety of data may be stored in such cookies, and information may be stored in the cookie in response to various events such as the web sites that have been visited by the customer.

In another embodiment, the customer information may comprise the telephone number of the customer, as determined from an ANI (Automatic Number Identification) signal received from a telephone the customer has used.

Once customer information is received, it may be stored by the controller in the customer database 230 (FIG. 2). Accordingly, information stored in this manner would be more readily accessible in the future, even by new vendors and subsidizing vendors that had not previously interacted with the customer.

The controller 110 may verify whether the customer information is accurate and complete (step 1714). For example, if the information is provided by the customer, it can be advantageous to assure that the customer information is not false.

To provide a further incentive for the customer to provide accurate customer

5 information, a penalty may be assessed against the customer if the customer information is not accurate. For example, if it is determined that the customer information is not accurate (step 1716), the subsidy to the customer may be canceled and the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1710). Alternatively, a penalty fee may be charged to the customer if it is determined that the customer information is
10 not accurate. In such an embodiment, it may be further advantageous to verify the customer information before the purchase is consummated. Thus, the threat that the subsidy will not be forthcoming can encourage the customer to provide accurate and complete information.

If it is determined that the customer information is accurate (step 1716),
15 then the controller 110 determines the amount of the subsidy (step 1718). The subsidy amount is typically stored in the offer rules database 270 (FIG. 2). The subsidy amount may be, for example, a predetermined amount or a predetermined percentage (e.g. a predetermined percentage of the total price). In one embodiment, the subsidy amount may also be limited, such that the price charged cannot be lower than zero (i.e. the
20 subsidy may not include a credit). For example, a subsidy amount may be "up to \$100 off, but no more than the total price". The subsidy amount is provided to the first vendor (step 1720) as described above with respect to step 1312 of FIG. 13.

Referring to FIGS. 18A and 18B, a flow chart 1800 illustrates another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to

purchase items from a first vendor. The controller 110 receives a signal via the vendor server indicating that the customer is ready to "check out" his virtual "shopping cart" of items on a web site of the first vendor (step 1802). As is understood by those skilled in the art, a shopping cart of items on a web site defines a set of items the customer desires to purchase. Checking out the shopping cart indicates a desire to proceed with purchasing the selected items. Those skilled in the art will understand that there are still other ways for a customer to indicate that he is to purchase items.

Before the customer purchases the items, the controller 110 transmits to the vendor server an offer for a reduction in the total price in exchange for signing up for a service with a second vendor (step 1804). For example, the service may be telephone service, Internet service, banking services, credit card account services, insurance service, securities trading service, satellite television service, or cable television service. Accordingly, the second vendor would be a provider of such services, and the customer would be requested to participate in a transaction (e.g. initiate a service agreement with) with the second vendor.

Subsequently, a response from the customer is received (step 1806) via the vendor server. If it is determined that the offer is not accepted (step 1808), then the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1810). If however it is determined that the offer is accepted (step 1808), then a current service provider of the customer (i.e. a party that provides a specified service to the customer) is determined (step 1812). The customer may be asked to provide information of the current provider, or this information may be determined from other sources. For example, one or more databases may be accessed to determine the long distance telephone service provider of

the customer. Alternatively, the second vendor may allow access to a database of its existing customers to ascertain whether the customer is included in that database.

If it is determined that the customer has a service provider (step 1814), and it is determined that the second vendor already provides the customer with the specified service (step 1816), then the transaction is processed conventionally (step 1810). If it is determined that the customer has a service provider (step 1814), but it is determined that the second vendor does not provide the customer with the specified service (step 1816), then the customer must have a service agreement with another service provider. Accordingly, the existing service agreement is canceled (step 1818).

If it is determined that the customer does not have a service provider of the specified service at all (step 1814), (or if the controller 110 will cancel or has canceled the existing service agreement) then a new service agreement is initiated with the second vendor (step 1820). Thus, the second vendor has acquired a new customer, either by signing up the customer for a new service or by switching providers of the specified service that is provided to the customer. In exchange, the total price of the shopping cart of items is reduced by the amount of the subsidy (step 1822), and controller 110 directs the vendor server to sell the items for this reduced total price (step 1824).

Referring to FIG. 19, a flow chart 1900 illustrates another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to purchase items from a first vendor. The controller 110 receives an indication that the customer is ready to purchase items from a first vendor (step 1902). The controller 110 may also receive customer information (step 1904), as described above. The customer information may

comprise, for example, a location of the customer or a current service provider of the customer.

A set of subsidies for which the customer may be eligible is determined (step 1906). In one embodiment, the set of subsidies is determined based on customer information. For example, upon reference to the customer information, one or more offer rules may be satisfied. The subsidies corresponding to the satisfied rules would then be included in the set of subsidies. In another embodiment, the offer rules may be satisfied without reference to customer information. For example, an offer rule may be satisfied if the total price of the items (or the price of any of the item) is greater than (or less than) a predetermined threshold. An offer rule may also be satisfied if a particular item is purchased. In yet another embodiment, one or more subsidizing vendors may be contacted, customer information may be transmitted to the subsidizing vendors, and in response the subsidizing vendors may transmit to the controller 110 a description of a subsidy to offer. In still another embodiment, a subsidizing vendor may be selected (e.g. based on a preferential ranking) and a subsidy from this subsidizing vendor is selected.

Offers for each of the subsidies may be provided to the customer (step 1908) for the customer to select one (or more). For example, each offer may be listed on a web page, and the customer must click a hyperlink corresponding to his desired offer. The offers may be provided substantially simultaneously, allowing the customer to evaluate all offers before selecting an offer. Alternatively, the offers may be provided sequentially to the customer. In such an embodiment, the customer would be provided with additional offers only after rejecting one or more offers provided to him. The order in which offers are provided may be determined by the rank of each

subsidizing vendor that provides the offer. The controller 110 may ascertain the rank of each offer by referencing the field 728 (FIG. 7) for each subsidizing vendor that provides the offer. The offers could then be provided in a sequence defined by the rank of each offer.

5 The customer selection is received (step 1910) and the corresponding subsidy amount is transferred to the first vendor (step 1912). Alternatively, the customer may be similarly prompted to select a vendor from a plurality of vendors, and the customer would subsequently be provided with an offer for a subsidy from the selected vendor.

10 The controller 110 may select one (or more) offers to provide to a customer based on various criteria. For example, the offer with the highest historical acceptance rate may be selected. The historical acceptance rate may be calculated based on data derived from the fields 1022 and 1024 (FIG. 10). Similarly, the offer with the highest profit (e.g., to the vendor or subsidizing vendor) may be selected.

15 The customer may select two or more offers, thereby generally receiving more of a benefit than if he had selected only one offer. For example, the customer may select offers that require him to (i) sign up for a particular credit card account, (ii) sign up for a particular satellite television service, and (iii) switch to a new provider of cellular telephone service. The controller 110 could charge the accounts of each of
20 three subsidizing vendors, and the aggregate amount charged could be used to reduce the price charged to a customer for a purchase.

 The customer described herein may, in one embodiment, comprise a group of customers such as a group dining at a restaurant. In such an embodiment, an offer may be accepted by a plurality of customers. For example, if an offer for a

subsidy includes a \$75 subsidy amount, then if two customers accept the price of the purchase may be reduced by \$150 ($\$150 = \75×2).

Referring to FIGS. 20A and 20B, a flow chart 200 illustrates another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer that is to purchase items from a first vendor. Specifically, in the illustrated embodiment a customer may be allowed to add more items if a subsidy amount of an offer exceeds the total price of the items he had already selected.

The vendor server receives an indication that the customer is to purchase a first set of items from the vendor (step 2002). The vendor server then transmits the indication of the items to the controller 110 (step 2004). In response, the controller 110 transmits and the vendor server receives an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a subsidizing vendor (step 2006). This indication may include an indication of a subsidy amount.

The vendor server provides the customer with an offer for a subsidy (step 2008). A response to the offer is received (step 2010). If it is determined that the offer is not accepted (step 2012), then the transaction is processed conventionally (step 2014).

If it is determined that the offer is accepted (step 2012), then an indication of the acceptance is transmitted to the controller 110 (step 2016). If the subsidy amount is greater than the total price of the set of items (step 2018), then the transaction is suspended (step 2020) and the customer is instructed to select an additional set of items (step 2022). The customer may be instructed in the same way the customer may be provided with an offer for a subsidy. For example, a POS terminal may display a textual representation of the instructions, which is read by the

customer or read to the customer by a cashier. In another embodiment, a web page may display text describing the instructions.

Subsequently, the vendor server receives an indication of a second set of items the customer has selected (step 2024). The second set and the first set are then purchased for a reduced purchase price. The customer is charged a reduced price (step 2026) which may be zero (e.g. if the subsidy amount exceeds the sum of the prices of the first and second sets of items).

Referring to FIG. 21, a table 2100 illustrates data used in another embodiment of the present invention in which a subsidy amount may be applied over time. The table 2100 represents information that may be stored in the customer database 230 and/or the customer database 330. Use of the information in the table 2100 is described in detail below with respect to FIG. 22. A customer identifier 2102 uniquely identifies a customer who is due to receive the subsidy amount over time. Credit card information 2104, such as a credit card number and account type, specify an account which may be repeatedly credited to grant the customer the benefit due. The number of credits remaining 2106, frequency 2108 and next credit date 2110 specify when the customer may receive another credit to his account. The amount credited to the specified credit card account is indicated by reference numeral 2112.

Referring to FIG. 22, a flow chart 2200 illustrates another embodiment of a method for providing an offer for a benefit to a customer. Specifically, in the illustrated embodiment a subsidy amount is applied over time by repeatedly crediting a credit card account. After the credit card account is credited (step 2202), the controller 110 sets the next credit date (step 2203) which may be readily calculated from the current date and the frequency 2108 (FIG. 21). The controller 110 then waits until the

next credit date (step 2204) and determines whether there are any more credits to apply (step 2206). If there are more credits remaining, then the controller 110 also determines whether the customer has met all of his obligations (step 2208). For example, the customer may have been required to sign up for and maintain a cellular telephone account with a particular subsidizing vendor. In such a situation, the controller 110 would determine whether the customer has canceled the required cellular telephone account. If all obligations have been met by the customer, then the account is credited again (step 2202).

In the above embodiment, additional or unused subsidy amounts may be, e.g., presented to the customer in the form of a store credit (applied against future purchases from the vendor). Alternatively, the unused subsidy amounts may be forfeited.

Although the present invention has been described with respect to a preferred embodiment thereof, those skilled in the art will note that various substitutions may be made to those embodiments described herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

What is claimed is:

- 1 1. A method, comprising the steps of:
2 receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a
3 first vendor;
4 transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an
5 indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an
6 indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;
7 receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;
8 providing an amount of funds to the first vendor; and
9 facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.
- 1 2. The method of claim 1, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 providing a hyperlink to a predetermined web site.
- 1 3. The method of claim 1, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 transmitting a form for receiving information.
- 1 4. The method of claim 1, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 determining a service provider that provides a service to the customer.

1 5. The method of claim 4, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 canceling a service agreement with the service provider.

1 6. The method of claim 4, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 initiating a new service agreement so that the service is provided by the second
4 vendor.

1 7. The method of claim 4, in which the step of determining a service provider that
2 provides a service to the customer comprises:
3 determining whether the service is provided by the second vendor.

1 8. The method of claim 1, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:
3 switching providers of a service that is provided to the customer.

1 9. The method of claim 8, in which the service comprises at least one of:
2 telephone service, Internet service, banking services, credit card account
3 services, insurance service, securities trading service, satellite television service, and
4 cable television service.

1 10. The method of claim 1, in which the step of facilitating the transaction between
2 the customer and the second vendor comprises:

3 initiating a new service agreement so that a service is provided to the customer.

1 11. The method of claim 10, in which the service comprises at least one of:
2 telephone service, Internet service, banking services, credit card account
3 services, insurance service, securities trading service, satellite television service, and
4 cable television service.

1 12. The method of claim 1, in which the step of transmitting an indication of an
2 offer comprises:
3 transmitting an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a plurality of vendors;
4 and in which the step of facilitating a transaction comprises:
5 facilitating transactions between the customer and the plurality of vendors.

1 13. A method, comprising the steps of:
2 receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a
3 first vendor via a web site;
4 selecting a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies;
5 transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an
6 indication of an offer for the subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an
7 indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;
8 receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;
9 receiving a first amount of funds from the second vendor;
10 providing a second amount of funds to the first vendor; and
11 facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

1 14. The method of claim 13, in which the step of selecting a subsidy from a
2 plurality of subsidies comprises:

3 selecting a vendor from a plurality of vendors; and
4 selecting a subsidy from the selected vendor.

1 15. The method of claim 13, in which the step of selecting a subsidy from a
2 plurality of subsidies comprises:

3 selecting a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies based on the at least one item.

1 16. The method of claim 15, in which the step of selecting a subsidy from a
2 plurality of subsidies comprises:

3 selecting a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies based on a price of the at least
4 one item.

1 17. The method of claim 13, in which the step of selecting a subsidy from a
2 plurality of subsidies comprises:

3 selecting at least two subsidies from a plurality of subsidies based on the at least
4 one item.

1 18. The method of claim 13, in which the step of transmitting an indication of the
2 offer for the subsidy from the second vendor comprises:

3 transmitting an indication of at least two offers for subsidies from a second
4 vendor.

- 1 19. The method of claim 18, further comprising:
2 receiving from the customer a selection of at least one offer of the at least two
3 offers.
- 1 20. The method of claim 13, in which the step of receiving the first amount of funds
2 from the second vendor comprises:
3 charging the first amount to an account corresponding to the second vendor.
- 1 21. The method of claim 13, in which the step of receiving the first amount of funds
2 from the second vendor comprises:
3 initiating a transfer of funds from an account corresponding to the second
4 vendor.
- 1 22. The method of claim 13, in which the step of providing the second amount of
2 funds to the first vendor comprises:
3 crediting an account corresponding to the first vendor.
- 1 23. The method of claim 13, in which the step of providing the second amount of
2 funds to the first vendor comprises:
3 initiating a transfer of funds to an account corresponding to the first vendor.
- 1 24. The method of claim 13, in which the step of transmitting an indication of an
2 offer comprises:
3 transmitting an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a plurality of vendors;

4 and in which the step of receiving a first amount of funds from the second vendor
5 comprises:
6 receiving a portion of the first amount of funds from each of the plurality of
7 vendors;
8 and in which the step of facilitating a transaction comprises:
9 facilitating transactions between the customer and the plurality of vendors.

1 25. The method of claim 13, in which the step of receiving the first amount of funds
2 from the second vendor comprises:
3 charging a third amount to a first account corresponding to the second vendor;
4 and
5 charging a fourth amount to a second account corresponding to a third vendor,
6 in which the first amount is a sum of the third amount and the fourth amount.

1 26. The method of claim 13, in which the step of receiving the first amount of funds
2 from the second vendor comprises:
3 initiating a transfer of a third amount of funds from a first account
4 corresponding to the second vendor; and
5 initiating a transfer of a fourth amount of funds from a second account
6 corresponding to a third vendor,
7 in which the first amount is a sum of the third amount and the fourth amount.

1 27. The method of claim 13, further comprising:
2 calculating the second amount of funds based on the first amount of funds.

1 28. The method of claim 13, in which the second amount of funds is based on a
2 predetermined amount less than the first amount of funds.

1 29. The method of claim 13, in which the second amount of funds is based on a
2 predetermined percentage of the first amount of funds.

1 30. The method of claim 13, in which the indication of the offer for the subsidy
2 comprises:
3 an indication of a subsidy amount, and
4 an indication of a transaction the customer is required to perform in exchange
5 for receiving the subsidy amount.

1 31. A method, comprising the steps of:
2 transmitting an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase, the
3 at least one item having an associated total price;
4 receiving, in response to the transmitted indication of the at least one item, an
5 indication of an offer for a subsidy from a vendor;
6 providing to the customer, in response to the received indication of the offer, the
7 offer for the subsidy, the step of providing the offer being performed before the item is
8 purchased;
9 receiving from the customer an acceptance of the offer;
10 transmitting an indication of the acceptance of the offer; and
11 charging the customer a second price for the at least one item, the second price
12 being less than the total price.

1 32. The method of claim 31, in which the step of providing to the customer the offer
2 for the subsidy comprises:

3 displaying text that represents the offer.

1 33. The method of claim 31, in which the step of charging the customer the second
2 price for the at least one item comprises:

3 crediting an amount of funds to an account, the amount of funds being based on
4 a difference between the total price and the second price.

1 34. The method of claim 33, in which the step of crediting comprises:

2 crediting the amount of funds to a credit card account.

1 35. The method of claim 33, in which the step of crediting the amount of funds to
2 the account comprises:

3 crediting a first amount of funds to the account; and

4 crediting a second amount of funds to the account.

1 36. The method of claim 35, in which the step of crediting the second subsidy
2 amount to the account is performed at least a predetermined time after the step of
3 crediting the first subsidy amount to the account is performed.

1 37. The method of claim 31, in which the step of charging the customer the second
2 price for the at least one item comprises:

3 charging the second price to an account.

1 38. The method of claim 37, in which the step of charging comprises:
2 charging the total price to a credit card account.

1 39. The method of claim 31, in which the step of charging the customer the second
2 price for the at least one item comprises:
3 transmitting a request to purchase an additional item;
4 receiving an indication of an additional item that a customer is to purchase, the
5 at least one item having an associated second price;
6 charging the customer the second price for the at least one item and the
7 additional item, the second price being less than a sum of the total price and the second
8 price.

1 40. The method of claim 31, further comprising:
2 receiving an credit card identifier that identifies a credit card account.

1 41. The method of claim 31, further comprising:
2 receiving an amount of funds from the vendor.

1 42. The method of claim 41, in which the amount of funds is based on a difference
2 between the second price and the total price.

1 43. The method of claim 31, further comprising:
2 receiving an amount of funds from a party other than the customer.

- 1 44. The method of claim 31, further comprising:
2 calculating the second price based on the total price.
- 1 45. The method of claim 31, in which the second price is based on a predetermined
2 amount less than the total price.
- 1 46. The method of claim 31, in which the second price is based on a predetermined
2 percentage of the total price.
- 1 47. The method of claim 31, further comprising:
2 facilitating a transaction between the customer and the vendor.
- 1 48. The method of claim 31, in which the step of receiving an indication of an offer
2 comprises:
3 receiving, in response to the transmitted indication of the at least one item, an
4 indication of a plurality of offers for subsidies.
- 1 49. The method of claim 48, in which the step of providing the offer for the subsidy
2 comprises:
3 providing to the customer the offers for the subsidies.
- 1 50. The method of claim 49, in which the step of providing to the customer the
2 offers for the subsidies comprises:

3 providing the offers for the subsidies substantially simultaneously to the
4 customer.

1 51. The method of claim 49, in which the step of providing to the customer the
2 offers for the subsidies comprises:

3 providing the offers for the subsidies sequentially to the customer.

1 52. The method of claim 51, in which the step of providing to the customer the
2 offers for the subsidies comprises:

3 providing a first offer of the plurality of offers to the customer;

4 receiving from the customer a rejection of the first offer; and

5 providing a second offer of the plurality of offers to the customer after receiving
6 the rejection.

1 53. The method of claim 51, further comprising:

2 ascertaining a rank of each offer of the plurality of offers;

3 and in which the step of providing to the customer the offers for the subsidies
4 comprises:

5 providing the offers for the subsidies in a sequence defined by the rank of each
6 offer.

1 54. The method of claim 48, in which the step of providing the offer for the subsidy
2 comprises:

3 selecting at least one offer of the plurality of offers; and

4 providing to the customer the selected at least one offer.

1 55. The method of claim 54, in which the step of selecting at least one offer

2 comprises:

3 selecting the at least one offer based on a historical acceptance rate of each
4 offer.

1 56. The method of claim 54, in which the step of selecting at least one offer

2 comprises:

3 selecting the at least one offer based on a profit of each offer.

1 57. The method of claim 31, in which the indication of the offer for the subsidy

2 comprises:

3 an indication of a subsidy amount, and

4 an indication of a transaction the customer is required to perform in exchange
5 for receiving the subsidy amount.

1 58. The method of claim 57, in which the step of charging comprises:

2 not charging the customer for the at least one item if the subsidy amount is
3 greater than the total price; and

4 crediting an amount of funds to an account, the amount of funds being based on
5 a difference between the total price and the subsidy amount.

1 59. The method of claim 57, in which the step of charging comprises:

charging the customer a second price for the at least one item, the second price being based on a difference between the total price and the subsidy amount.

60. The method of claim 31, in which the second price is zero.

61. An apparatus, comprising:

means for receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a first vendor;

means for transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;

means for receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;

means for providing an amount of funds to the first vendor; and

means for facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

62. An apparatus, comprising:

a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

receive an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a first vendor;

8 transmit, in response to the received indication of the at least one item,
9 an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an
10 indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;
11 receive an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;
12 provide an amount of funds to the first vendor; and
13 facilitate a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

1 63. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
2 implementing a method performed by a processor, the method comprising the steps of:
3 receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a
4 first vendor;
5 transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an
6 indication of an offer for a subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an
7 indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;
8 receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;
9 providing an amount of funds to the first vendor; and
10 facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

1 64. An apparatus, comprising:
2 means for receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to
3 purchase from a first vendor via a web site;
4 means for selecting a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies;
5 means for transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one
6 item, an indication of an offer for the subsidy from a second vendor, the step of

transmitting an indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;

means for receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;

means for receiving a first amount of funds from the second vendor;

means for providing a second amount of funds to the first vendor; and

means for facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second

vendor.

65. An apparatus, comprising:

a data storage device; and

a processor connected to the data storage device,

the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and

the processor operative with the program to:

receive an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a first vendor via a web site;

select a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies;

transmit, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an indication of an offer for the subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting

an indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;

receive an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;

receive a first amount of funds from the second vendor;

provide a second amount of funds to the first vendor; and

facilitate a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

1 66. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
2 implementing a method performed by a processor, the method comprising the steps of:
3 receiving an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase from a
4 first vendor via a web site;
5 selecting a subsidy from a plurality of subsidies;
6 transmitting, in response to the received indication of the at least one item, an
7 indication of an offer for the subsidy from a second vendor, the step of transmitting an
8 indication of the offer being performed before the at least one item is purchased;
9 receiving an indication that that the customer accepts the offer;
10 receiving a first amount of funds from the second vendor;
11 providing a second amount of funds to the first vendor; and
12 facilitating a transaction between the customer and the second vendor.

1 67. An apparatus, comprising:
2 means for transmitting an indication of at least one item that a customer is to
3 purchase, the at least one item having an associated total price;
4 means for receiving, in response to the transmitted indication of the at least one
5 item, an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a vendor;
6 means for providing to the customer, in response to the received indication of
7 the offer, the offer for the subsidy, the step of providing the offer being performed
8 before the item is purchased;
9 means for receiving from the customer an acceptance of the offer;
10 means for transmitting an indication of the acceptance of the offer; and

11 means for charging the customer a second price for the at least one item, the
12 second price being less than the total price.

1 68. An apparatus, comprising:
2 a data storage device; and
3 a processor connected to the data storage device,
4 the data storage device storing a program for controlling the processor; and
5 the processor operative with the program to:
6 transmit an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase,
7 the at least one item having an associated total price;
8 receive, in response to the transmitted indication of the at least one item,
9 an indication of an offer for a subsidy from a vendor;
10 provide to the customer, in response to the received indication of the
11 offer, the offer for the subsidy, the step of providing the offer being performed before
12 the item is purchased;
13 receive from the customer an acceptance of the offer;
14 transmit an indication of the acceptance of the offer; and
15 charge the customer a second price for the at least one item, the second
16 price being less than the total price.

1 69. A computer readable medium encoded with processing instructions for
2 implementing a method performed by a processor, the method comprising the steps of:
3 transmitting an indication of at least one item that a customer is to purchase, the
4 at least one item having an associated total price;

5 receiving, in response to the transmitted indication of the at least one item, an
6 indication of an offer for a subsidy from a vendor;
7 providing to the customer, in response to the received indication of the offer, the
8 offer for the subsidy, the step of providing the offer being performed before the item is
9 purchased;
10 receiving from the customer an acceptance of the offer;
11 transmitting an indication of the acceptance of the offer; and
12 charging the customer a second price for the at least one item, the second price
13 being less than the total price.

1 / 25

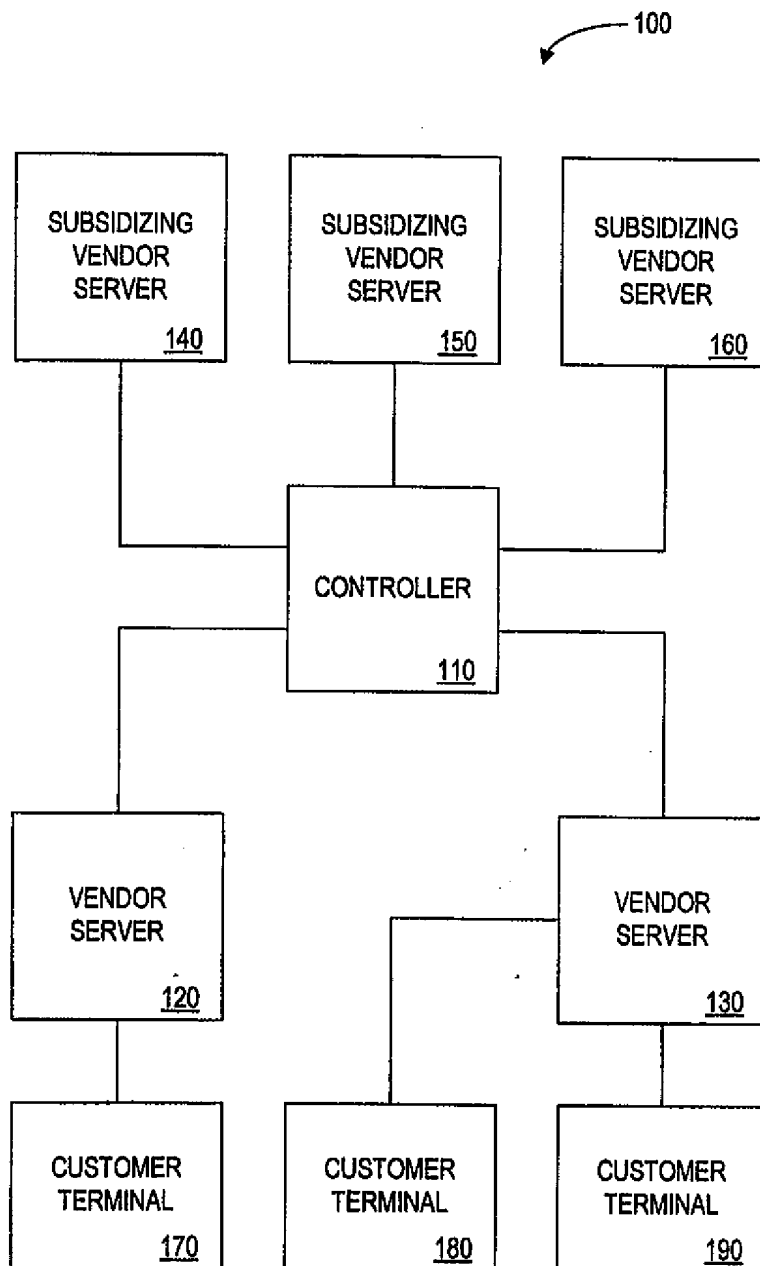


FIG. 1

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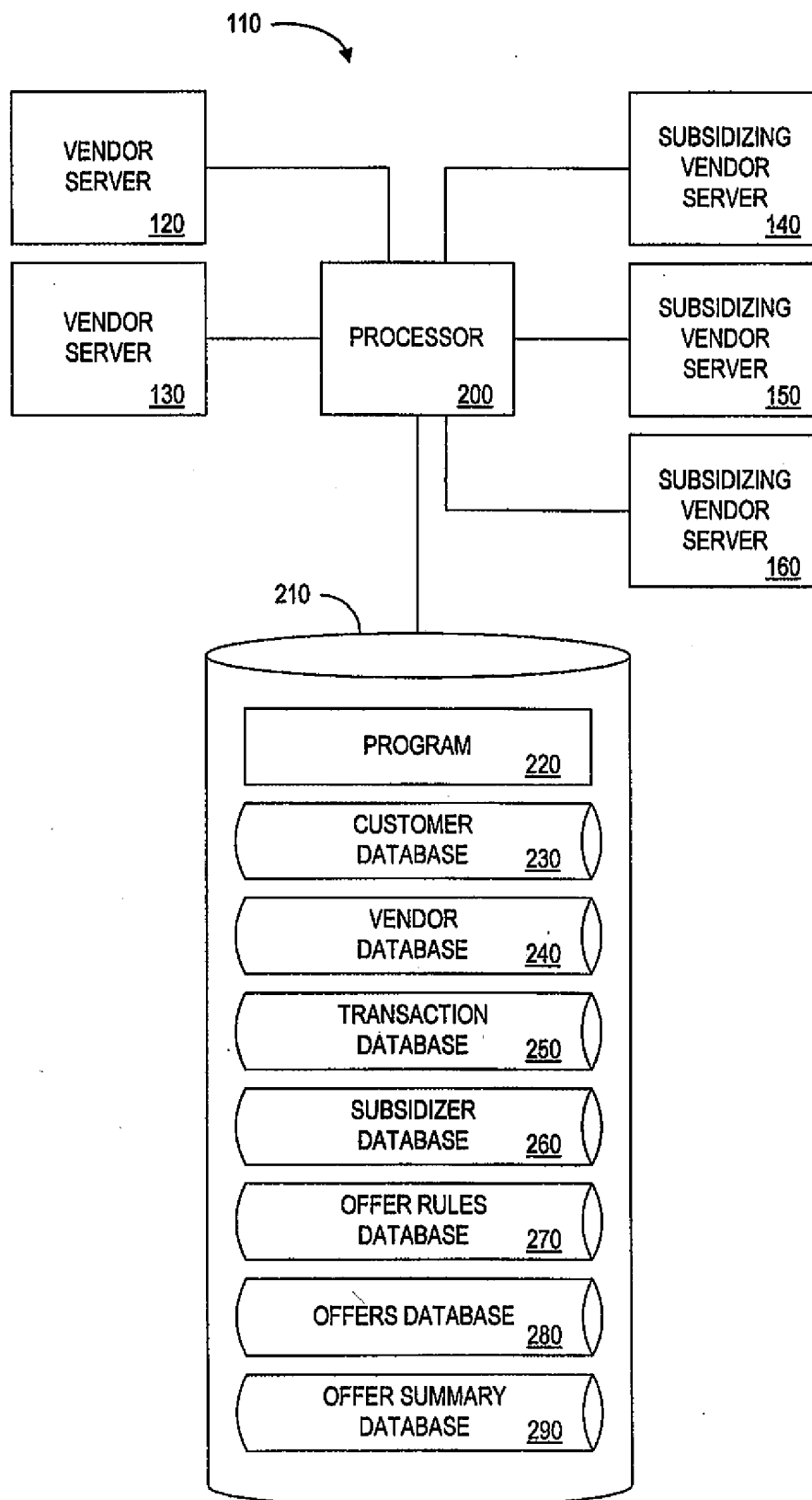


FIG. 2

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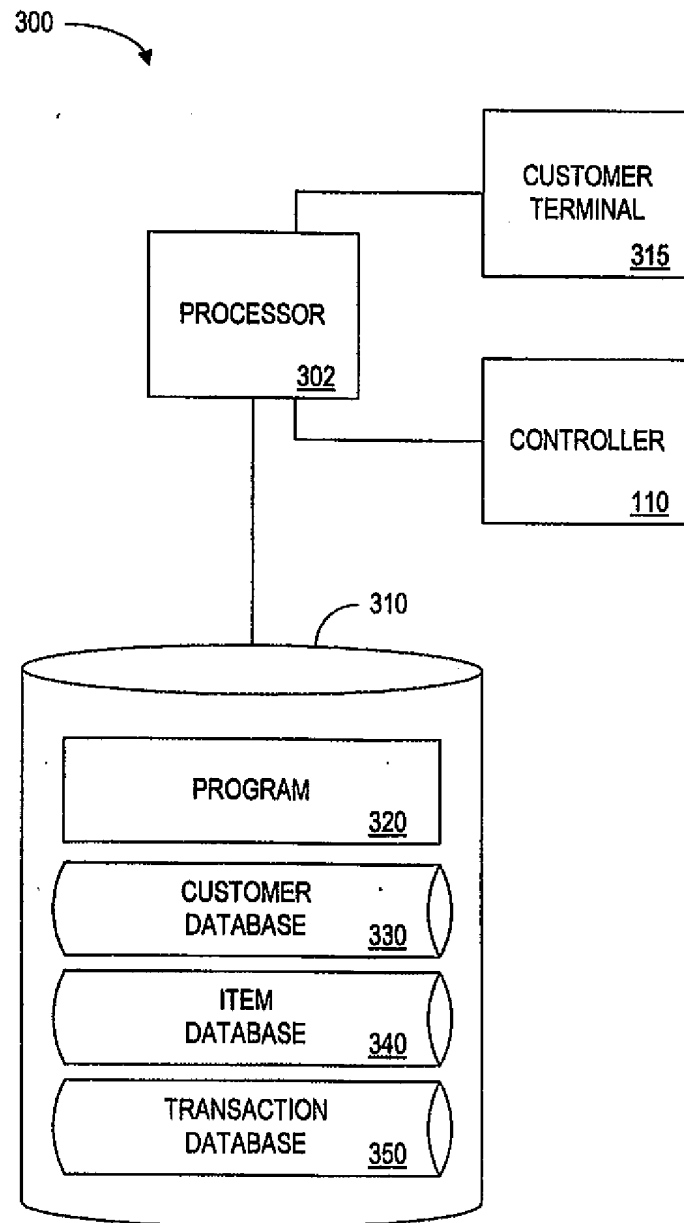


FIG. 3

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400

CUSTOMER IDENTIFIER 420	NAME 422	BILLING ADDRESS 424	CREDIT CARD INFORMATION 426	E-MAIL 428
C0001	DAN MANN	123 MAIN ST.	VISA 1111-1111- 1111-1111	DMANN@ ISP.COM
C0002	STEVE DAVIS	3 RIVERPLACE ROAD	AMEX 4444-5555 6666-3333	SDAVIS@ SCHOOL.EDU
C0003	JEFF SMITH	2 THRUSH LANE	DIS 2222-3333 4444-7777	SMITH@ WEBTV.COM
C0004	GEORGE ALAN	15 LAUREL AVENUE	VISA 1111-4444- 8888-3333	ALAN@ WORK.COM

402
404
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FIG. 4

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500

VENDOR IDENTIFIER <u>520</u>	VENDOR NAME <u>522</u>	VENDOR E-MAIL ADDRESS <u>524</u>	AMOUNT OWED TO VENDOR <u>526</u>
V001	VENDOR X	X@X.COM	\$0.00
V002	VENDOR Y	Y@Y.COM	\$100.00
V003	VENDOR Z	Z@Z.COM	\$987.13
V004	VENDOR Q	Q@Q.COM	\$45.00

FIG. 5

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600

TRANSACTION IDENTIFIER 620	TIME OF TRANSACTION 622	ITEMS ORDERED 624	CREDIT CARD INFORMATION 626	AMOUNT CHARGED 628	DELIVERY ADDRESS 630	CUSTOMER IDENTIFIER 632
T 000 001	1/4/2001 8:07 AM	P038, P049, P812	VISA 1111-1111- 1111-1111 EXP. 3/2002	\$49.87	123 MAIN ST. TOWN, USA	NONE
T 000 002	1/9/2001 9:00 PM	P123	MASTERCARD 2222-2222- 2222-2222 EXP. 9/2002	\$0.00	9876 PARK AVE. CITY, USA	C1234
T 000 003	1/10/2001 3:02 AM	P456, P789, P789	AMEX 9999-9999- 9999-9999 EXP. 4/2005	\$0.00	24 SHADY LA. TOWN, USA	C5678

602 604 606

FIG. 6

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700

SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER <u>720</u>	SUBSIDIZING VENDOR NAME <u>722</u>	ACCOUNT <u>724</u>	AMOUNT OWED BY SUBSIDIZING VENDOR <u>726</u>	RANK <u>728</u>
S001	CREDIT CARD COMPANY X	BANK ACCOUNT #2345678	\$855.00	1
S002	LONG DISTANCE TELEPHONE Y	MC 1111-2222- 3333-4444	\$4,390.00	2
S003	SATELLITE TELEVISION Z	PREPAID BALANCE \$10,500	\$0	3

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FIG. 7

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800

OFFER RULE IDENTIFIER 820	SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER 822	SUBSIDY AMOUNT 824	WHEN EFFECTIVE 826	ADDITIONAL TRANSACTION REQUIRED 828
R0001	S11	UP TO \$50	ALWAYS	SIGN UP FOR CREDIT CARD ACCOUNT
R0002	S12	UP TO \$50	PURCHASING ITEM P004	SIGN UP FOR CREDIT CARD ACCOUNT
R0003	S12	\$40	CREDIT CARD = VISA AND TOTAL PRICE > \$100	SIGN UP FOR VISA PLUS ACCOUNT
R0004	213	\$80	CUSTOMER IS FROM A NEW ENGLAND STATE	SIGN UP FOR CELLULAR TELEPHONE SERVICE
R0005	S14	\$75	CUSTOMER DOES NOT HAVE CABLE TELEVISION FROM SERVICE PROVIDER	SIGN UP FOR CABLE TELEVISION

802

804

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810

FIG. 8

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900

OFFER IDENTIFIER 920	TRANSACTION IDENTIFIER 922	SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER 924	OFFER RULE APPLIED 926	SUBSIDY AMOUNT 928	TOTAL PRICE 930	TOTAL PRICE WITH SUBSIDY 932	ACCEPTED 934
F001	T123	S111	R1230	\$50	\$97.12	\$37.12	YES
F002	T456	S222	R4561	\$100	\$19.95	\$19.95	YES
F003	T789	S345	R7892	\$10	\$10.00	\$0	YES
F004	T109	S678	R0123	\$15	\$15.00	\$0	YES
F005	T555	S901	R3454	\$75	\$48.00	\$0	YES

902

904

906

908

910

FIG. 9

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1000

SUBSIDIZING VENDOR IDENTIFIER: S888				1002
TOTAL NUMBER OF OFFERS: 1,794				1004
TOTAL NUMBER OF OFFERS ACCEPTED: 1,003				1006
TOTAL AMOUNT OF SUBSIDIES: \$52,800.00				1008
OFFER RULE IDENTIFIER 1020	NUMBER OF OFFERS 1022	NUMBER OF OFFERS ACCEPTED 1024	AMOUNT OF SUBSIDIES DUE 1026	
R1111	1004	500	\$2,500.00	
R2222	790	503	\$50,300.00	

1010

1012

FIG. 10

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1100

1102	ITEM IDENTIFIER 1120	ITEM DESCRIPTION 1122	ITEM PRICE 1124	AVAILABILITY 1126
	1104			
	P001	WAR AND PEACE	\$13.95	IN STOCK
	P002	SUN TZU: THE ART OF WAR	\$15.95	AVAILABLE IN 2-3 DAYS

FIG. 11

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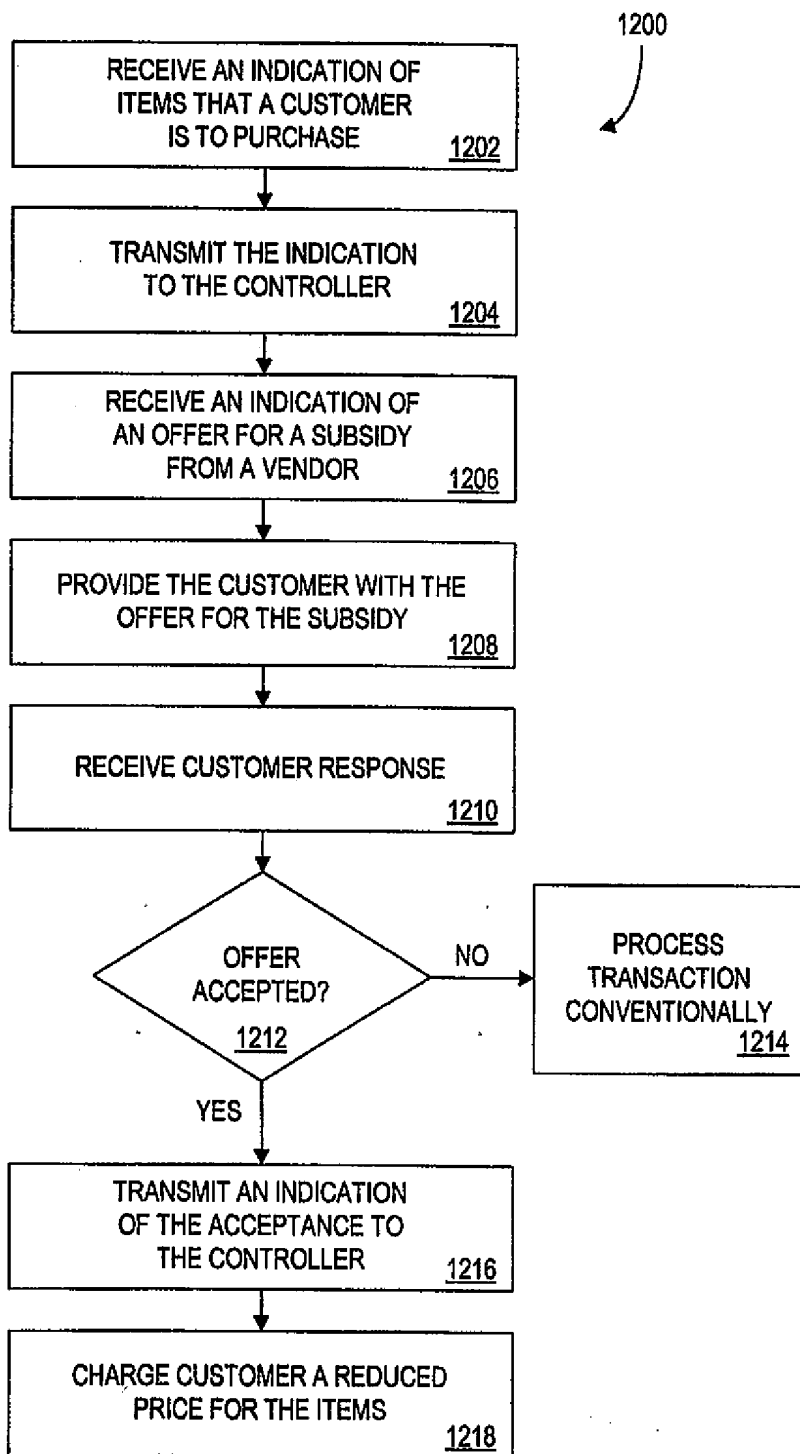


FIG. 12

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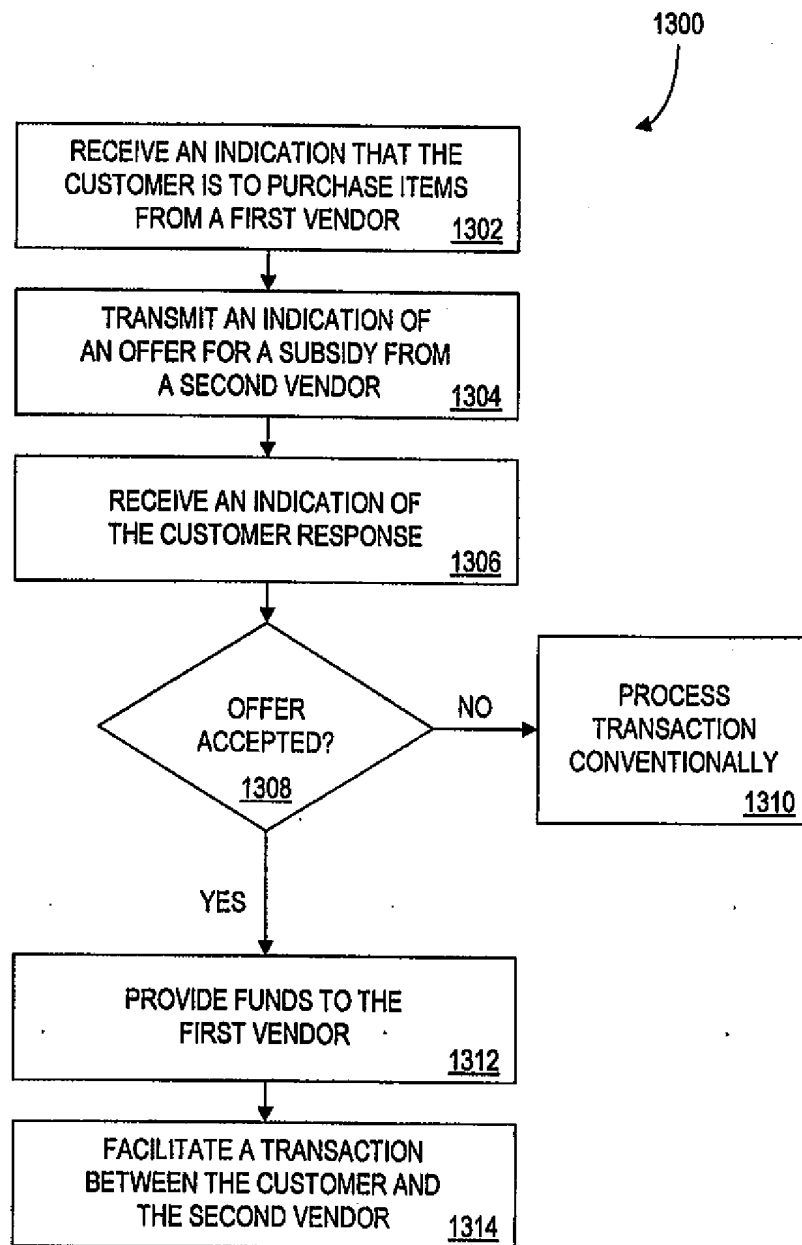


FIG. 13

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1400

QUANTITY AND TITLE INFORMATION
FOR ITEMS IN YOUR SHOPPING CART:

<u>QTY.</u>	<u>TITLE</u>
1	WAR AND PEACE; TOLSTOY, LEO

PRICE \$13.95

SHIPPING \$5.00

TOTAL PRICE \$18.95

CLICK HERE TO SEND
US YOUR ORDER

GET THIS PURCHASE
FOR FREE!

FIG. 14

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1500

**APPLY FOR AN ANYBANK VISA CREDIT CARD
ACCOUNT AND YOUR PURCHASE IS
ABSOLUTELY FREE!**

APPLICATION FOR CREDIT

NAME:	<input type="text"/>
ADDRESS 1:	<input type="text"/>
ADDRESS 2:	<input type="text"/>
CITY, STATE, ZIP	<input type="text"/>
SOC. SEC. NUMBER:	<input type="text"/>
ANNUAL INCOME:	<input type="text"/>

1504

CLICK HERE TO
COMPLETE THE
APPLICATION

1502

1506

BACK TO MY
SHOPPING CART

FIG. 15

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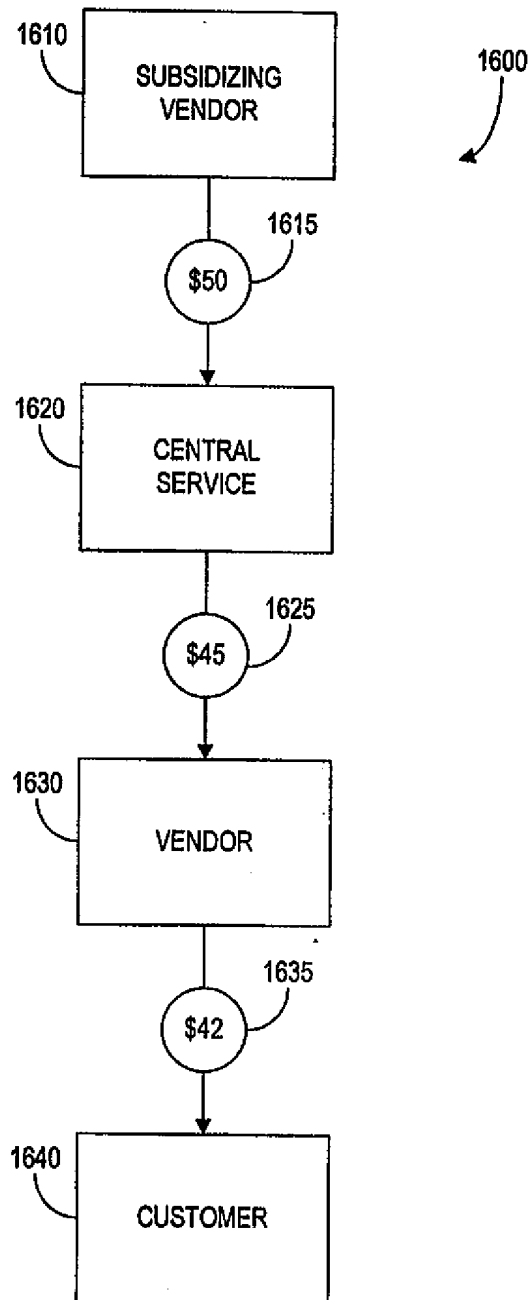


FIG. 16

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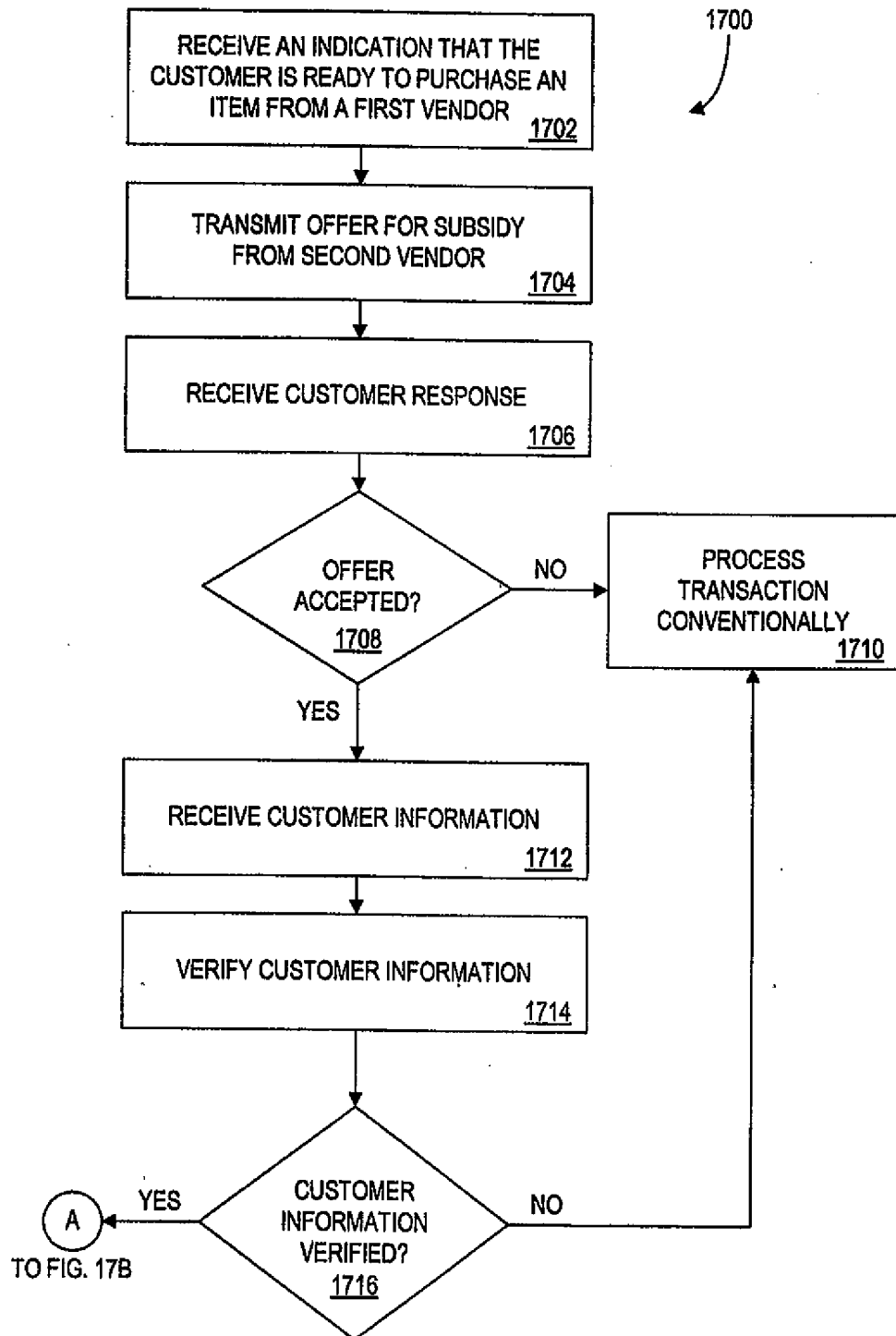


FIG. 17A

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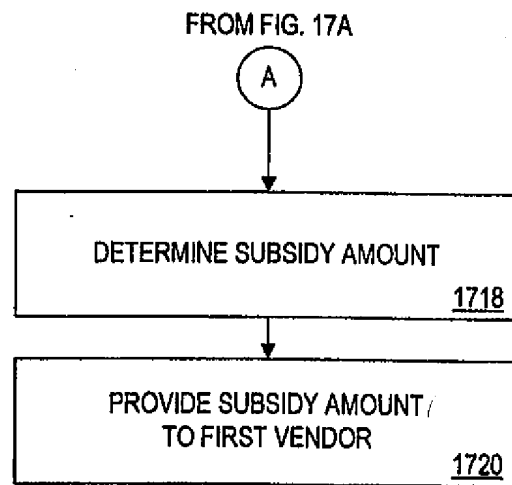


FIG. 17B

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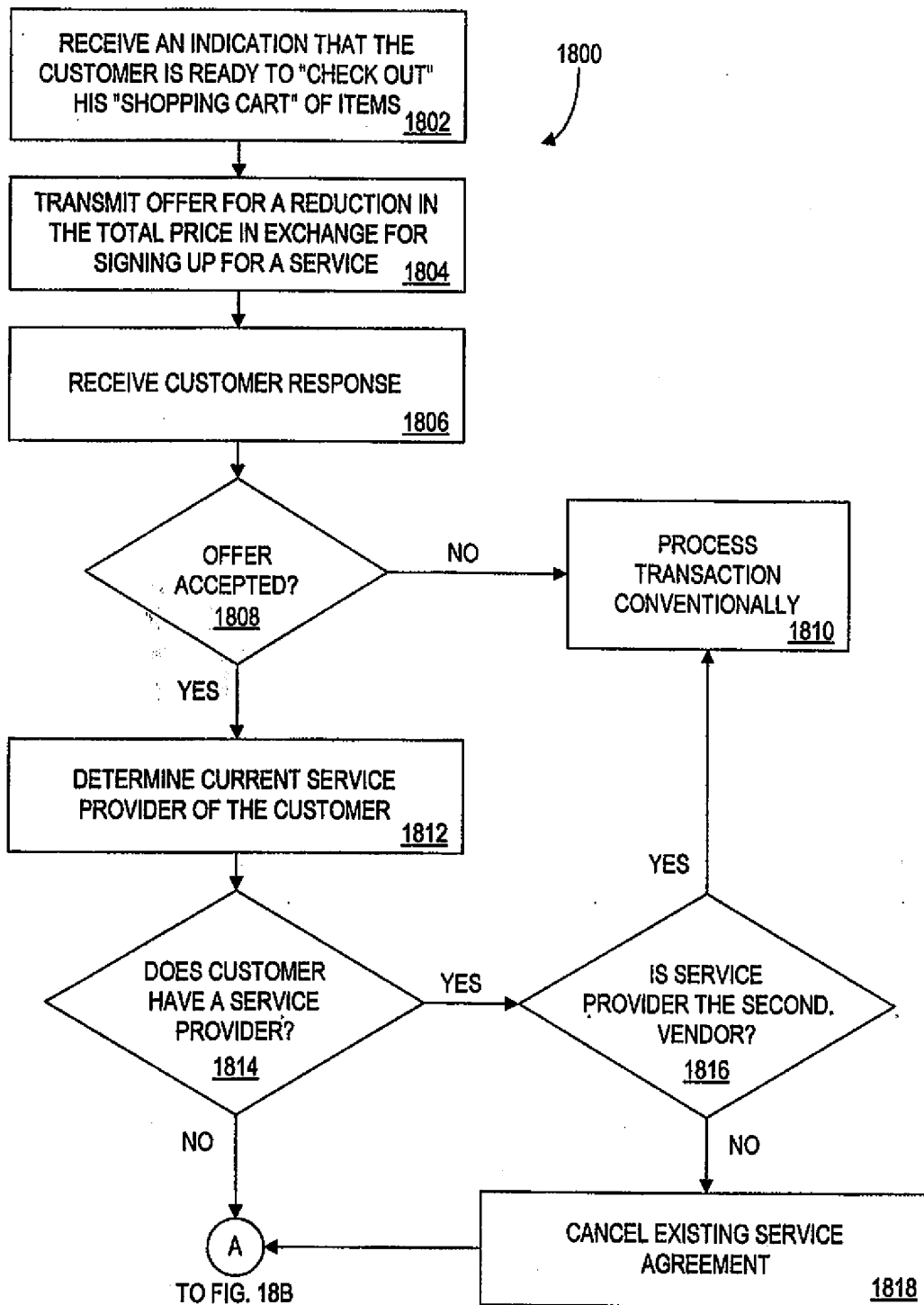


FIG. 18A

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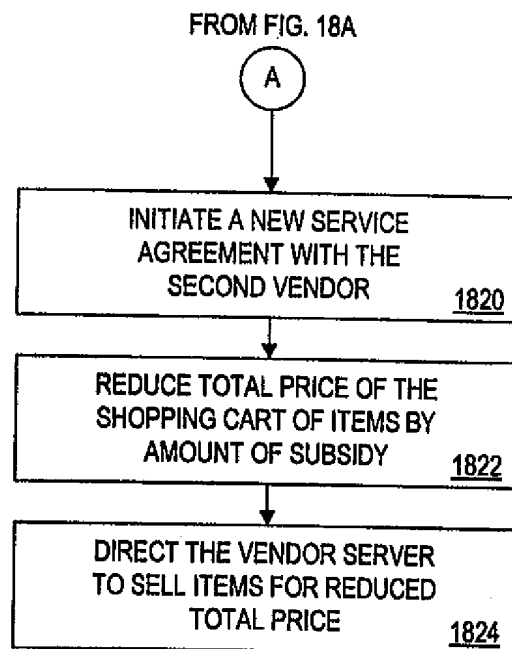


FIG. 18B

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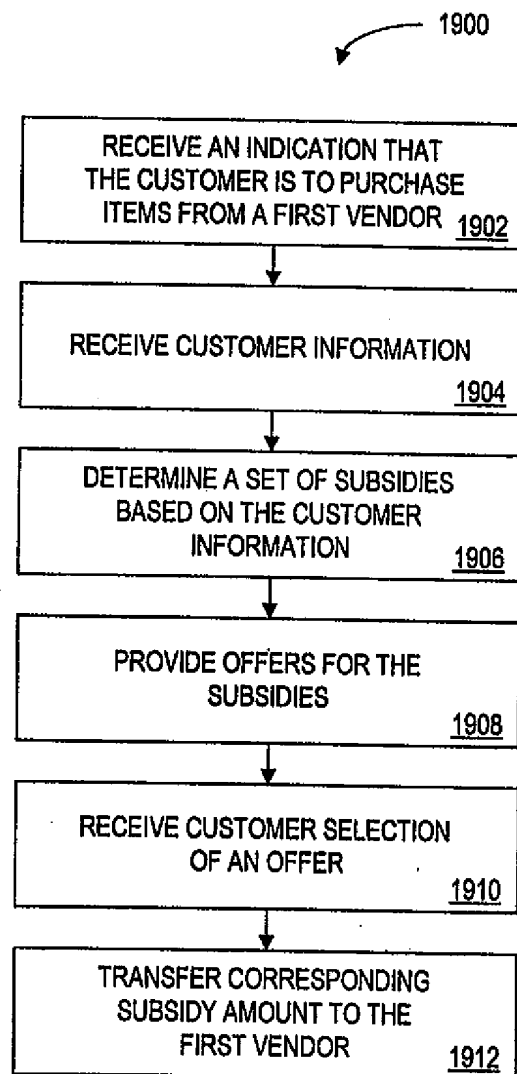


FIG. 19

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2000

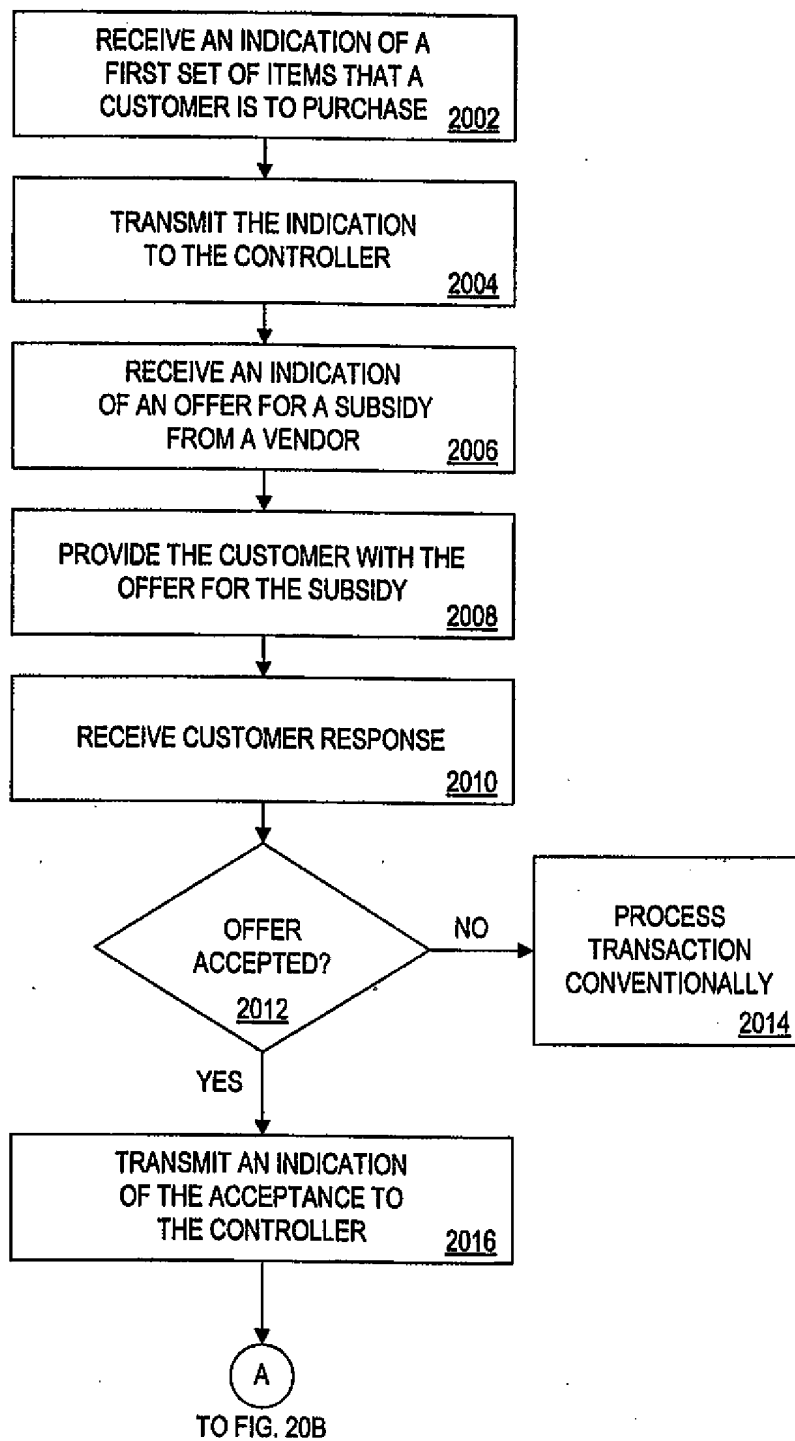


FIG. 20A

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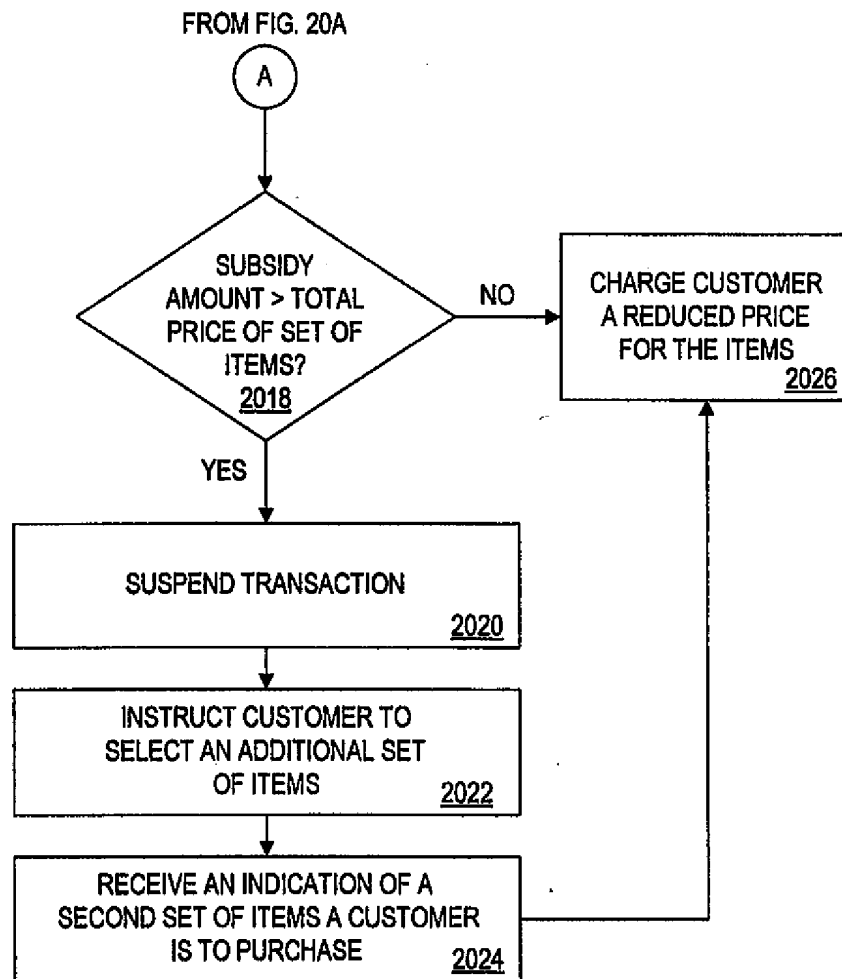


FIG. 20B

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2100

2102	CUSTOMER IDENTIFIER	C0002
2104	CREDIT CARD INFORMATION	AMEX 4444-5555-6666-3333
2106	NUMBER OF CREDITS REMAINING	3
2108	FREQUENCY	ONCE PER MONTH
2110	NEXT CREDIT DATE	3/18/2002
2112	AMOUNT OF CREDIT	\$10.00

FIG. 21

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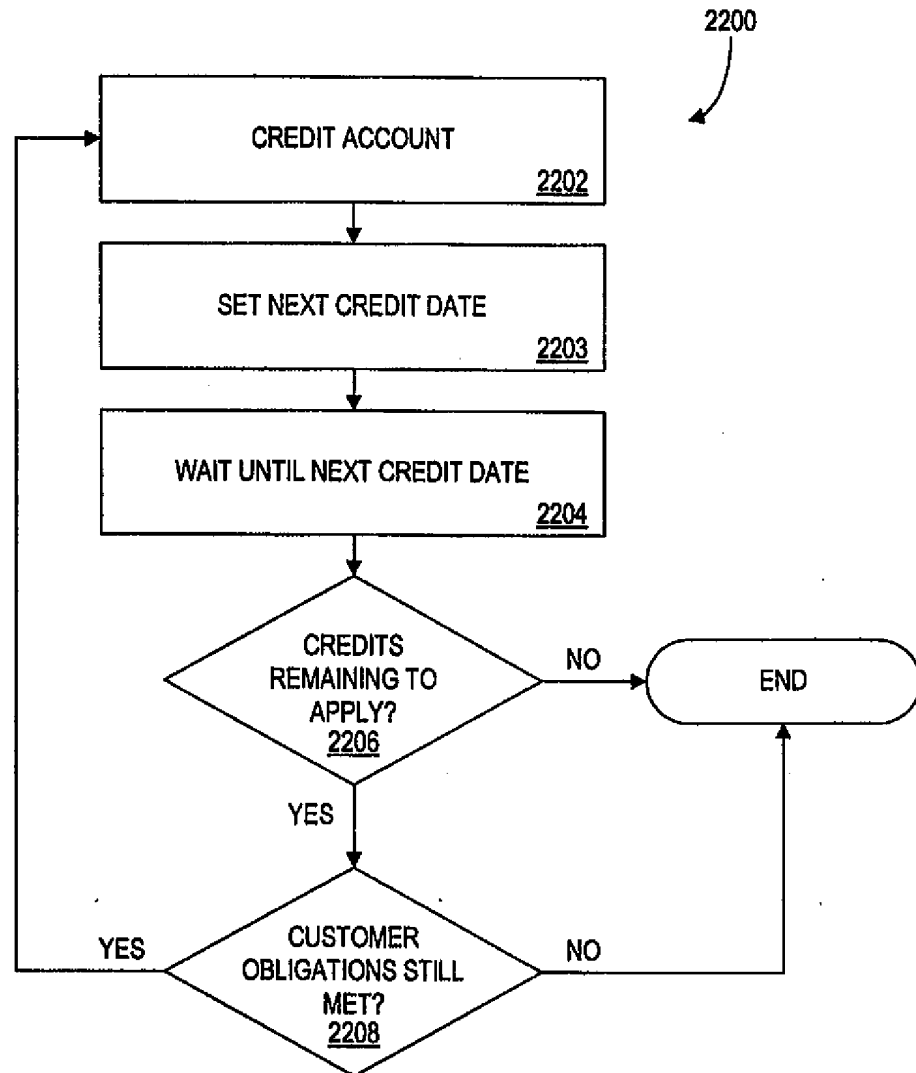


FIG. 22

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US99/13819

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(6) :G06F 17/60, 17/00

US CL :705/26, 14

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/26, 14, 1, 27, 16

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

Please See Extra Sheet.

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X ----- Y	US 5,434,394 A (ROACH et al) 18 July 1995 Figure 3a, 3b, and 3c. col. 1 lines 50-67, col. 2 lines 48-65, col. 6 lines 1-5, col. 10	1, 13, 31, 61-69 ----- 2-12, 14 -30, 32-60
X ----- Y	US 5,570,417 A (BYERS) 29 October 1996, ab. col. 4 lines 27-62 col. 5	1, 13, 31 61-69 ----- 2-12, 14 -30, 32-60
Y	FICKENSCHER, LISA. American Express Seeks to Mine Its Data on Cardholder Spending Patterns. The American Banker. 24 March 1997. p 20.	2-12, 14 -30, 32-60



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:	*T* later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
A document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	*X* document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
B earlier document published on or after the international filing date	*Y* document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
L document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	*A* document member of the same patent family
O document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	
P document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	

Date of the actual completion of the international search

16 SEPTEMBER 1999

Date of mailing of the international search report

21 OCT 1999

Name and mailing address of the ISA/US
Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks
Box 5000

Authorized officer

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US99/13819

C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	FICKENSCHER, LISA. Amex to Start Free Rewards Program with Discounts on Merchandise. The American Banker. 18 October 1996 p 10.	2-12, 14 -30, 32-60
Y	FITZGERALD, KATE. Amex Program Moves Loyalty to Next Level. Advertising Age. 04 November 1996. p 2	2-12, 14 -30, 32-60
Y,P	US 5,893,075 A (PLAINFIELD et al) 06 April 1999 col. 4 lines 51-65, col. 6 lines 36-58	1-67
Y,E	US 5,918,211 A (SLOANE) 29 June 1999 col. 5 lines 64-67, col. 6 lines 1-11, col. 8 lines 1-50	1-67

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US99/13819

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Electronic data bases consulted (Name of data base and where practicable terms used):

APS, DIALOG

search terms: promotion, rebate, discount, reward, incentive, credit card, online shopping, cashback, application, service provider